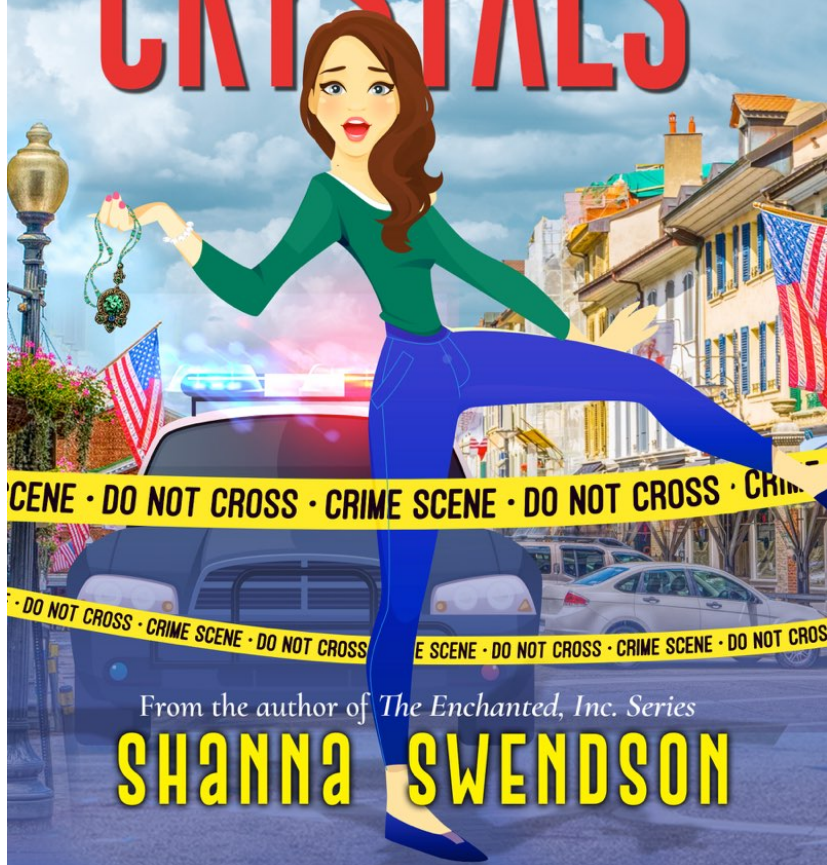


Case of the **CURIOUS CRYSTALS**



From the author of *The Enchanted, Inc. Series*

SHANNA SWENDSON

Case of the Curious Crystals

Shanna Swendson

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Chapter One

After only about a month in Stirling Mills, the town was already living up to all my hometown fantasies. I went to all the local events, was a regular at a couple of downtown restaurants, and knew most of the people I saw around town. I was part of a community in a way I'd never been before during my nomadic life. I had to admit to a thrill as I arrived at the town's fanciest restaurant to be guest of honor at a Civic League luncheon. It seemed that being the town's newspaper editor made me something of a local VIP.

I'd dressed for the occasion in a vintage 1940s suit that made me look like a sassy girl reporter in an old movie. I realized I was mixing genres, since this event was more like something from a made-for-cable movie—one of those romances about a city girl who comes to a small town and finds herself coming to love small-town life—but the suit made me feel professional and competent, like a woman who could hold her own against anyone.

The Old Mill restaurant was in an actual old mill on the banks of the river that ran beside the town. The water wheel on the side no longer worked, but it made for a picturesque setting. The interior of the restaurant was equally scenic, with a wall of windows overlooking the river and open beams under the peaked roof. Tables had been arranged in a U shape, with a small lectern at the middle of the head table.

I approached the check-in table. Patricia Peete, one of the

members of the newspaper board, sat there, wearing her signature pink. “Lexie!” she greeted me. “Welcome. We’re so glad you could make it.”

“I was honored to be invited,” I said, meaning every word.

She handed me a small piece of plastic with “Lexie Lincoln: Stirling Mills *Gazette*” printed on it and magnetic fittings on the back. “Wow, fancy,” I said. It was just like the members’ permanent name tags.

“We don’t do things halfway,” she said. “We’ll be getting started in a few minutes, so feel free to mingle.”

I attached the name tag to my lapel and moved deeper into the room. I didn’t have a chance to feel awkward and alone because Margarita Reyes, my closest friend in the town so far, came up to me. “Hey, you,” she said. “Good to see you here.”

“I didn’t know you were a member,” I said.

“If you own a business in this town, you pretty much have to be. Plus, this is my chance to check out the competition.” Margarita ran the Mexican restaurant downtown where I ate most of my dinners out. “This used to be a steakhouse straight out of the seventies, the kind of place your parents went on date nights—you know, iceberg lettuce with Thousand Island dressing, steak, loaded baked potatoes, maybe creamed spinach if you wanted a vegetable, and baked Alaska as a fancy dessert. But they’ve got a new chef who’s apparently shaken things up. I hear he’s doing some interesting dishes, but don’t expect to see any of them today. They’re catering to the crowd that thought the way this place used to be was the epitome of fine dining.”

“It does look like a good setting for a date,” I said, noticing the tables on the deck outside and the strings of tiny lights draped from the eaves. I could imagine the deck being really romantic at night.

She sighed. “I wouldn’t know. I run a restaurant so I don’t get out much at night. I don’t remember my last date. But what about you? I seem to have seen you in my place most weekends—alone.”

“Hey, I’ve been in town for maybe five minutes. I haven’t had a chance to meet anyone.” That wasn’t entirely true, and one of the single men I knew approached us even as I spoke.

“Lexie! Good to see you here,” Jordan Randall said. He was a software millionaire—billionaire on a good day in the stock market—who’d returned to his hometown after selling his company. He was trying to revitalize the little central Texas town by restoring the historic downtown and bringing in artists and businesses, so I wasn’t at all surprised to see him at a Civic League meeting. “Greetings to our guest of honor.”

“I think they’re just being nice to the newcomer,” I said, trying to sound casual, like I was a guest of honor all the time.

“It’s important for the civic and business leaders to get to know the new newspaper editor,” he said. “You hold one of the most important positions in town.”

We didn’t get a chance to chat because more people came over to meet me. Even with the aid of name tags, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to remember all the names and match them with faces and with the businesses they represented since I was meeting them all at once.

It wasn’t merely business leaders here, as I realized when a stout man in a police uniform came up to me and shook my hand. “I don’t believe we were properly introduced,” he said. “Chief Porter. Stumbled over any dead bodies lately?” He laughed at his own joke.

“Just the one, but I took care of finding the murderer for you, so that’s okay.” Coming across the body of the former editor who was supposed to interview me for the job had been an interesting way to start my tenure in town.

He flushed bright red and laughed again, this time his laugh sounding forced. “Yes, well.” The league president tapping the microphone at the lectern to suggest that everyone find a seat so the lunch could begin saved me from the awkward moment.

A tall, sturdy-looking woman in a floral dress approached me.

“Lexie? Hi, I’m Marybeth Winston, the league secretary. Would you like to come take your seat?” She escorted me to a place at the head table and sat beside me. A salad was already at each place, along with glasses of iced tea and water. Once we were seated, Marybeth passed the bread basket to me, and I took a roll. She let me eat a few bites of my salad before asking, “How are you liking small-town life so far? I bet it’s really dull compared to Dallas.”

“Well, I did start out with a murder investigation,” I said.

“And you solved an old case, while you were at it.”

“But it’s all good news since then,” I said. “That’s a nice change of pace.” I never would have believed it before, but it really was. I enjoyed the chance to write about the bright side of life instead of spending my time delving into the darker side of humanity.

She frowned. “Then you must not have heard of the crime wave.”

My fork full of salad froze halfway to my mouth as my contented little bubble burst. “Crime wave?”

“There’s been a rash of break-ins in my neighborhood. Nothing major stolen. It’s almost like they’re breaking in just to let us know that they can get into our homes.” She shuddered, clearly unsettled by the thought.

“No, I’ve heard nothing about that. It hasn’t been in the police blotter they send me each week.”

She made a soft snorting sound and gave a sidelong glare in the direction of Chief Porter. “Yes, well, hmmmph.”

“I’ll look into it,” I promised. If nothing major was stolen, then it probably wasn’t serious. Maybe it would turn out to be an amusing prank, or it would reveal someone in need of help, and the town would rally in support. That was the way it happened in movies.

After a meal of rather good chicken piccata, the league president stood and started the meeting. I took a few sips of water and ran my tongue around my teeth as unobtrusively as I could to make sure I wouldn’t have anything green sticking out when it was

my turn to speak. The president introduced a teenager who'd been sitting at the other end of the head table as the town's duchess for a neighboring town's festival. Another girl was introduced as the league's scholarship winner, and a third girl was recognized as Student of the Month. I took notes on the back of the notecards for my speech so I could add an item to the paper before it went to press. Then I was introduced to talk for a few minutes about the newspaper and what I hoped to do with it.

I hadn't done much public speaking since I had to do oral reports in school, but this was easy because I felt so accepted. "Thank you for having me," I began. "Taking on this job has been a real change of pace for me. I never would have imagined myself working at a small-town newspaper, but it's been the best career move I've ever made. I feel like I finally have a hometown, for the first time in my life." I went on to describe my childhood as the daughter of an air force officer who got a new assignment every few years. As I spoke, I noticed a shadowy figure moving through the room, wearing work clothes from about 1900, when the mill was still operating as a mill. I forced my attention back to my speech and went on to describe what I hoped to do with the newspaper, ending with an invitation to send me news or suggestions for things I needed to cover.

The applause was more than I would have expected. I even got a standing ovation. After the applause died down, the president welcomed me as a new member of the league, which explained the permanent name tag. They'd accepted me as one of their own.

I was still riding that high when I returned to the newspaper office. I'd barely sat down at my desk when a voice nearby said, "Where have you been? You should know better than to take off for a couple of hours on deadline day."

I turned to see a woman perched on the corner of my desk. I managed not to flinch in surprise, though I was still getting used to her presence. "Civic League luncheon," I explained. "They were introducing me to the town's business leaders, which is important

for my job.”

“They’re still doing that on Thursdays, huh? I tried to tell them years ago that it was a bad day for me.”

One of the strange things about this job was that although I had the title of editor and theoretically ran the newspaper, answering only to the board that controlled the finances, the ghost of the former editor, who hung around the office—and sometimes the apartment upstairs—still ran things from beyond the grave. Jean Jacobs had started working for the paper in the twenties, when she was in her twenties, and hadn’t let a little thing like death get in the way of editing the newspaper. While my journalistic skills had been a factor in me getting the job, my most important qualification was my ability to see and communicate with ghosts. Jean wanted to make sure her successors knew who was really in charge.

“The paper’s mostly done,” I said. “It’s in layout, so there wasn’t anything for me to do, and I had to eat lunch, anyway.”

She scowled at me. “Are you wearing my clothes?”

I looked down at my vintage outfit. “I found these in a box in the closet. Are they yours?”

“Who else do you think they belonged to? I was the one who lived here when those were in style.”

“Do you mind? I thought it was a sharp outfit.”

“I was a snazzy dresser, wasn’t I? The clothes suit you, kiddo. Help yourself. It’s not as though I’m using them these days.”

The phone on the desk—an old-fashioned black model—jangled and I answered, “Stirling Mills *Gazette*. How may I help you?”

“This is Marybeth Winston; we met at lunch today,” the voice on the other end said.

“Oh, yes. Thank you again for having me.” I hoped she wasn’t calling to nag me about that crime wave she’d mentioned. I’d barely made it back to the office, so I hadn’t had a chance to begin investigating.

“Remember that crime wave I told you about?”

I stifled my instinctive groan. “Yes.”

“Well, I got home and found that they hit me. They got my neighbor and me at the same time, while we were at the luncheon.”

“Oh, wow,” I said. Although it had been kind of nice filling a newspaper with positive news, a crime wave made a good story, one that was also of public interest, a real service to the community. “Can I come over now and get the details? I might be able to fit an item in the next issue if I get it done quickly.”

“Yes, please, do come over and see the scene for yourself.”

I took down her information, and it was hard to focus because I had a ghost leaning over me, saying, “Now, that’s what we need to spice up this issue. It might even be worth holding the presses for.”

“My thoughts exactly,” I said as I grabbed my purse and headed out.

The burglaries were in the old neighborhood near downtown, close enough that I might have walked if I hadn’t been wearing heels. As I got out of my car, a police SUV pulled up. The front door of a well-preserved Victorian home with a wraparound porch opened and a middle-aged woman came running out, just as Lt. Wes Mosby emerged from the SUV. He was a drastic contrast from his boss, tall and fit, and generally quite capable—when he wasn’t suspecting me of murder. The afternoon sun turned his auburn hair a brighter shade of red, and I was momentarily distracted. Before I could say anything to him, the homeowner reached us. I recognized her from the luncheon, though we hadn’t spoken directly. “Mrs. Holtz,” he said in greeting. “You said you had a break-in.”

“Yes. I’m so glad you’re here.” She turned toward me, frowning. “I didn’t call the newspaper.”

Wes turned to look at me. “Lucky Lexie strikes again. Just happening upon a crime scene?”

Before I could tell him who’d called me, Marybeth came out of the house next door and crossed the lawn toward us, a small, fluffy

dog running at her side. "There you are!" she called out to me. "I told you we have a crime wave."

"Crime wave? We've had a few break-ins, but that's hardly a wave," Wes said.

"Is that common for this town?" I asked.

"We have our occasional property crime," he said with a shrug.

Marybeth said with a pointed glare at Wes, "Someone is clearly after something."

"I called the police, not the newspaper," Mrs. Holtz said, still frowning.

Wes turned to her. "I'll have a look." He added with a glare at me, "Alone." He and Mrs. Holtz headed to her house.

Marybeth took my arm. "That's okay. I can show you what happened at my place. I wouldn't say that anyone actually broke in. I must have left a door unlocked. But I do have something missing."

"You should tell Lieutenant Mosby and make a formal report."

"I don't think he'd take me seriously. It wasn't anything valuable." I felt my hopes deflating. If Wes wouldn't think it was a big enough deal to investigate, I wasn't likely to get much of a story out of it, but since I was here, I figured I might as well get whatever scoop there was. Maybe the neighbor had a bigger crime and would be more willing to talk after Wes had investigated. Two adjacent homes being burglarized at the same time was bound to make for a story, even if it was just in the crime watch column.

She took me around through the backyard to the kitchen door. The whole time, her little dog stayed quietly at her heel. It was rather eerie. In my experience, most fluffy little dogs yapped and jumped all over strangers. I wondered if she was one of the residents descended from the carnival sideshow that got stranded in this town. I'd learned that some of their acts had relied on uncanny abilities. She might have been descended from animal tamers who had a supernatural affinity with animals. "They must have come in while I was out at the luncheon," Marybeth said as

we reached her back door. “I wouldn’t have thought to look if I hadn’t heard my neighbor yelling about her house being broken into.”

“What was taken?”

“My jewelry box, the whole thing. I don’t understand. The only value of anything in there was sentimental. There were things I inherited from my grandmother.”

Once we were in her bedroom, she gestured dramatically toward a dresser with an empty space on top, where I presumed the jewelry box had been. The sight wasn’t particularly enlightening.

I might not have thought much of it if I hadn’t seen the woman dressed in a baggy, ankle length dress standing next to the dresser. She was faded and blurry enough that I knew right away she had to be a ghost. “You have no idea what you’ve lost,” she said.

Chapter Two

I froze as my skin broke out in goosebumps. I still found ghosts rather unsettling, especially when they spoke to me. Yeah, I worked with Jean, but it was easy to forget that she was a ghost. In fact, she was more alive than some of the flesh-and-blood editors I'd worked with. This looked more like I'd expect a ghost to look, ethereal and spooky. Marybeth didn't react, so either she was familiar with her home's unearthly squatter or she didn't see it. Her little dog stared in that direction but remained quiet.

It sounded like there might be more to this story than Marybeth knew, and the ghost could give me the scoop. Unfortunately, you can't have a proper conversation with a ghost when other people are around without looking totally crazy. I couldn't think of a way to get Marybeth out of the room so I could find out what the ghost meant. The best I could do was ask Marybeth the questions I wanted to ask the ghost and hope the ghost would answer.

"What kind of jewelry was taken?" I asked, giving the ghost a quick glance.

"Oh, just some costume stuff," Marybeth said with a shrug. "My family never had much money—I'm descended from the sideshow people—but it was meaningful to me."

The ghost said, "That jewelry is far more valuable than you realize. It's our heritage, a sacred trust."

"It makes no sense that they'd take the cheap jewelry and not the TV or computer," Marybeth continued.

“No respect for people’s property,” the ghost said. “In my day, we didn’t have to lock the doors.”

I started to ask if she had any idea who the thief might be, but that question would sound utterly ridiculous to Marybeth, and the answer from the ghost would be useless. She looked outdated enough to have been out of circulation for decades, so she wouldn’t recognize anyone around town now.

Really, ghosts aren’t nearly as helpful as you’d think for tracking down a story. They tend to be bound to one place, and they’re usually focused on the things that matter to them, to the exclusion of all else. This ghost might not even have noticed the burglary if the thief had just taken the TV or computer. She cared about the jewelry, which might or might not have had anything to do with the reason behind the break-in.

I tried again with Marybeth. “Were there any pieces in the jewelry collection that were particularly meaningful?” To explain the question, I added, “Sometimes it helps to put an emotional appeal in a story like this. Then people are more inclined to give tips. Some thieves have even given items back when they learned they only had sentimental value.”

“It was costume jewelry that belonged to my grandmother and great-grandmothers, who came here with the sideshow. It was cheap stuff because they were poor even before the Depression. There was one necklace I used to call my diamond necklace when I was a kid, but I’m sure it was just a piece of crystal, maybe even glass. I’d like to get that back. And there was a brooch shaped like a peacock. It wasn’t real silver and had tarnished, but I always felt there was a story behind it, and it makes me think of my grandmother.”

“If you knew what it was, you’d have taken better care of it,” the ghost said as she walked past Marybeth. The dog turned its head like it was watching the ghost.

Marybeth shivered. “Knowing my grandmother, I bet she’d say it’s my fault for being careless. I think that’s part of why I’m so

upset. I feel like I've failed her, even though I know that's silly."

"It's not silly," I assured her with a sidelong glance at the scowling ghost.

"I may not have lost a lot, and neither have any of the others I've talked to, but someone else might if this goes on, and what if someone's at home when the burglars hit? That's why I feel like something needs to be done. Each one of these cases is so minor that the police aren't too worried, but if you put them all together, it's a disturbing trend."

"I'll put something in the paper that will warn people," I assured her. "If there isn't anything else . . ."

"That's all I know," Marybeth said. She escorted me out, just as Wes stepped out of the house next door with that homeowner.

After a quick thanks to Marybeth, I hurried across the lawn to join them before they left the porch. If there was a ghost there, the closer to the house I could get, the better. "There's been a string of break-ins in this neighborhood," I said to Wes.

"I don't think it's a string," he said. "There have been break-ins, but the method varies and the things taken are different. It's probably because it was spring break last week and the kids were out of school. When they get bored, they get up to mischief."

I could maybe see how kids might take costume jewelry without knowing that its only value was sentimental, but leaving computers behind? "They aren't always taking jewelry?" I asked.

"It was the silver here," Wes said.

"Jewelry?" Mrs. Holtz asked.

"Nothing too valuable, but Marybeth said they took some of her grandmother's pieces," I said.

"Just a minute," Mrs. Holtz said and hurried back into her house.

"What's this about, Lexie?" Wes asked.

"Whether or not the burglaries are connected, they are happening, and people need to know so they can take precautions," I said.

Mrs. Holtz returned. "My grandfather's watch is missing. It didn't even run anymore, but I kept it to remember him. It was a cheap old thing, but I'm sure it was dear to him. I think maybe my grandmother gave it to him as a present, and she must have really had to scrimp and save to buy it. It was in a box in the china cabinet, near where the silver was. I don't know why anyone would take it."

Wes jotted something in his notebook and said, "We'll keep an eye out for it. Let me know if you notice anything else missing."

As I walked with him down the sidewalk, he frowned at me and said, "You don't need to make a mountain out of a molehill here, Lex."

"By putting a crime watch item in the paper?" I asked, trying to look innocent.

"By treating a few burglaries like a major crime wave."

"How do you know what I'm going to do with it? I barely asked a question or two, and I haven't even written anything yet. But you should have let me know about the other incidents. They were suspiciously missing from the police blotter that was sent over."

"Oh? I'll look into that." He didn't sound at all sincere. In fact, I got the impression he was angry at me. I hadn't seen much of him since I'd moved to town. Because there wasn't a lot of crime—at least, not a lot that anyone let me know about—I hadn't had a lot of dealings with the police once that murder case had been resolved. Did he resent me for solving it before he did? I wondered if he'd feel better if he knew I had supernatural assistance with that.

It was a real pity that he'd taken a dislike to me because he was the cutest guy I'd met in town so far, the best candidate for that down-to-earth local guy who teaches the city girl how to slow down and enjoy life, like in the movies. I'd thought we were getting along pretty well once he no longer suspected me of murder, but it was almost like he'd been avoiding me once I came here to live full-time. "Well, if I'm going to get this in the crime

watch column before the paper goes to press, I'd better go," I said and turned to head toward my car. He didn't call me back. I heard his door slam as I got in my car.

When I got back to the newspaper office, I sat down at my desk and dashed off a quick e-mail to layout to get the information about the break-ins added to the crime watch column, then remembered to write a short paragraph about the girls being honored at the Civic League luncheon.

That done, there was nothing to do but wait to approve the final paper, so I put on the electric kettle to make a cup of tea. "Was there anything to that break-in?" Jean asked, startling me as I poured hot water over the tea bag I'd selected.

I yelped and barely got out of the way before I splashed boiling water all over myself. "Could you not sneak up on me like that?" I asked. "And I don't know how big it might be. At one house, they took the silver, but the lady who called me was only missing her grandmother's cheap costume jewelry. However, I ran into a ghost at that house who seemed to think it was a lot more valuable than that. The homeowner mentioned a pendant that had crystal or glass in it that she used to pretend was a diamond. I wonder if it really might have been a diamond, and they just assumed it was crystal because someone like that wouldn't have been able to afford diamonds."

She adjusted her jaunty hat as she draped herself in—or slightly on top of—my guest chair. "Diamonds? Who was it?"

"The victim's name was Marybeth Winston. I don't know her grandmother's name. I'm assuming the grandmother was the one talking to me."

"The name doesn't ring a bell. It's probably a married name. Which house was it?"

"I'm guessing it was built in the twenties, one of those square houses with a wide porch, on Locust Street, middle of the block, next to a Victorian."

"I think I know the one, but I don't remember who lived there.

What did the ghost look like?"

"That's harder to describe. I couldn't see her coloring, and I don't know if she looked like she did in her prime or when she died. She had a squarish face, short hair."

Jean shook her head. "Nope, sorry, can't help you."

"Marybeth said her family was with the sideshow."

Jean laughed. "Then it definitely wasn't diamonds. If anyone in that bunch had diamonds, they wouldn't have been stuck here."

"Would anyone in this town have had the money to buy diamonds from them?"

"I would have, depending on how big the diamond was."

"It could have been more valuable to them than the ability to leave town. The ghost did talk about it being part of their heritage, and she seemed upset."

"The jewelry didn't have to have diamonds in it to distress a ghost. If she's attached enough to hang around, she could be really clingy with her possessions."

"And the crime wave?"

"Don't get too excited, kiddo. Around here, it doesn't take much to get people worked up."

I didn't get far into the next day before Marybeth's worries about a crime wave began to look a lot more valid. Within minutes of the latest issue of the paper hitting the streets, the phone rang. When I answered, the caller said, "I saw the notice about the burglaries. I think that happened to me. It was just like in your article."

"Have you contacted the police?" I asked, in part because that really was the best way to deal with crime, but also because I loved the idea of Wes getting a big "told you so" from the townspeople when they bombarded him with reports of crimes he claimed I was making too big a fuss about.

"Not yet. I wasn't even sure there was a crime until I saw your article."

"How do you mean?"

“Well, there was no sign of a break-in, but we don’t always lock our back door. I’m not even sure when it happened, but last week I couldn’t find one of my great-grandmother’s brooches when I was getting dressed for church. I thought I might have misplaced it. But then I saw your article. I live in that same neighborhood, and I had the same sort of thing stolen, something that wasn’t valuable to anyone but me. It made me wonder. I don’t want to bother the police, though. It’s not as though I need a police report for an insurance claim, since there’s no monetary value. And it’s been so long that I doubt they’d be able to get fingerprints or any kind of evidence.”

I had to admit that she was probably right, but I took down her information. One piece of old costume jewelry going missing wasn’t much on its own, but if it was part of an overall scheme to take pieces that were related, every bit of information might help. “Can you describe the brooch for me?” I said.

“I’m fairly certain there’s nothing else like it around here. My great-grandmother was in the sideshow, so she brought it with her from wherever she came from. It was a little bird, gold—but not real gold—and it had a little crystal for its eye.”

“Crystal?”

“Or glass. Probably nothing very valuable. My grandmother used to joke that it was her diamond.”

Chapter Three

Crystal again. Or it could have been a chip of glass. Or maybe a real diamond and no one realized it. It seemed strange to have two cases like that. I wondered if this piece was also more valuable than its owner realized. “Okay, got it,” I said to the caller. “Thank you for calling. You should probably notify the police so they’ll know there’s a pattern.” And to add a big “nyah, nyah” to Wes, but I was too professional to say that out loud.

When I got off the phone, I marked the locations of the burglaries I knew about on a town map. They were all in the historic neighborhood near downtown. Marybeth had mentioned that some of her neighbors had also been hit. There was likely a higher concentration of long-term residents in that neighborhood. From what I’d seen, newcomers were more likely to settle in the newly built suburbs on the edge of town than to rehab an older home. Still, I only had a few dots, not enough to form much of a pattern.

A few minutes later, the phone rang again.

“I really need an assistant,” I muttered as I picked up the receiver. “Hello, Stirling Mills *Gazette*,” I said into it.

“I saw the story about the burglaries,” the caller, who sounded quite elderly, said.

“Yes?”

“I believe the same thing happened to me. They took my grandmother’s jewelry, which isn’t worth anything except to me.”

“Was your house broken into?”

“I didn’t notice anything, but my grandmother’s ring, necklace, and bracelet are all missing. I thought maybe my grandchildren had borrowed them, but then I saw the article, and I wondered. I live across the street from Marybeth.”

“Do you know when it might have happened?”

“I know I wore the necklace to church last Sunday, but it could have happened at any time since then.”

“You should talk to the police,” I urged, but before I let her go, I got all her information, in case I did a follow-up story. It looked like I had one, even if it was just a human interest feature about people losing items of sentimental value.

I added a dot to my map and got out a legal pad to chart the cases. All of them except the one with the silver involved the theft of costume jewelry that had belonged to members of the sideshow, and that one had involved a watch belonging to a sideshow member. They’d all mentioned something about crystals in the missing jewelry. All of them were in the same neighborhood.

Not only did I feel validated that something worth investigating was going on, but it was also gratifying to learn how quickly and closely people read the newspaper. I wouldn’t have thought anyone bothered to look at the crime blotter. In this town, the paper was more for creating a public record than for informing people, since everyone already knew everything that happened. I’d thought people mostly subscribed so they could clip articles about themselves or their loved ones. But it seemed that at least some people read it intently as soon as they got each issue.

The phone rang yet again. This was a new case, but it followed the same pattern: the historic neighborhood, sideshow family, costume jewelry with crystals stolen. I took down the info and suggested that the caller report it to the police.

“Sounds like you were on to something,” Jean remarked. She perched just above the corner of my desk. “We’ve got a real a crime wave.”

“But a really low-value one, unless that ghost was right.”

“That’s the part you need to look into.”

“No living person has said anything about the jewelry being valuable.”

She arched a thoroughly plucked eyebrow. “Gee, it’s a pity you can’t talk to anyone who isn’t living.”

“Yes, but finding them, being able to talk to them without a living person around who’ll think I’m nuts, and getting them to tell me anything useful or make any kind of sense is a real challenge. You’re the only ghost I’ve encountered so far who’s remotely coherent. Is there anyone you run into on the astral plane who might know anything?”

“You’re right about that remotely coherent problem, but I’ll see what I can do.” She winked out of sight, and the phone rang again.

This caller had a similar story, but told it in excruciating detail. I couldn’t even get a word in edgewise to ask questions, but I hated to cut her off in case she had some new information buried in that flow of words. I got the best description I’d had so far of a piece of missing jewelry, along with the details about a missing book that might or might not have been stolen because she couldn’t remember if she’d lent it to her sister, and a missing family photo, but it wasn’t much of a loss because she’d had it put on a CD when she had it duplicated. By the time I finally got her off the phone, I’d covered the margins of my legal pad in doodles of twining vines and roses, along with sketches of what I imagined the missing brooch looked like.

I updated my map and my chart, made a cup of tea, and sat down to get a head start on the next issue while I waited for calls to come in. I sorted a stack of news releases about upcoming events by date, adding the events I thought I should cover to my calendar and making a note if an event needed advance coverage. Most of them were merely items for the community calendar—a church bake sale, the garden club’s monthly meeting, the student council’s car wash. The one I suspected would take some effort was the

Spring Blossom Carnival, which sounded like something out of a Hallmark movie. It was a weekend-long festival with concerts, rides, and games. Because this was Texas, a queen would be crowned. Just reading the release, I could see the movie playing out in my head, including all the romantic moments during the carnival. I shook myself back to reality and put the release aside so I could look up how the event had been covered in the past and plan my coverage accordingly.

All that time, the phone kept ringing. I took two more reports about thefts, as well as a complaint from a reader about the lack of coverage of a community event. I honestly had never heard of the event, and when I asked if they'd sent me information about it, the caller hung up. I'd seen the letters the former editor got, so I knew this could sometimes be a no-win job, but that didn't make dealing with the disgruntled public any easier.

Speaking of disgruntled, a police vehicle stopped in front of the newspaper office, and the door slamming closed was so loud it made me jump. I braced myself before Wes threw open the office door and stalked inside. "What can I do for you, Lieutenant?" I asked, trying to sound calm even while conveying the sense of "What bee got into your bonnet?"

"Wow, you really blew the lid off something, didn't you?" he said, collapsing into my guest chair.

"You've been getting all the calls about thefts, too?" I asked, doing my best to maintain an aura of innocence.

"Yeah, because *someone*" —he directed a glare at me— "told people to call the police."

It took everything I had to keep from smiling. "Isn't that what people are supposed to do when there's a crime? I thought it was weird that they called the newspaper first. And I thought you said it wasn't a big deal."

"It's not," he said. "There's no 'wave.' It's just the same amount of petty crime that we always have, but when you report it as a pattern, it looks like a pattern. Most of these people didn't even

call the police initially because nothing of value was taken.”

I glanced at the notepad on my desk and the list of burglaries. “Not a pattern? Most of these calls were about people having cheap jewelry with sentimental value stolen, all within a few blocks of each other.”

“Exactly. That’s what tends to happen when amateurs decide to steal things. They go for the jewelry because they think it’s valuable, but they don’t realize that most people around here don’t have the good stuff. Like I said, last week was spring break, so kids were out when people weren’t home.”

“Most of these thefts involved a memento of an ancestor who was part of the sideshow.”

“More than half the town has an ancestor who was part of the sideshow. *I* have an ancestor who was part of it.”

“Have you had a break-in?”

“Most people aren’t dumb enough to break into a cop’s house. And I don’t have any mementos from my sideshow ancestor. My grandmother has all that. Do you think I should put her under guard?”

“Maybe. Or at least offer to keep her valuables safe for the time being.” I wasn’t sure that was entirely necessary, since his grandmother was pretty formidable. She was one of the newspaper board members.

He gave me a long, analytical look. “You’re serious about this. But why would someone go about stealing a bunch of things that aren’t worth anything?”

I couldn’t tell him that a ghost had said the jewelry was worth more than anyone realized. “Maybe they’re something that was cheap originally but that’s valuable now. The glasses that used to come in boxes of oatmeal are collectors’ items. Or, who knows, maybe one of the pieces is actually real and the thief is looking for that one.”

“These people were so poor that they got stuck here because they couldn’t afford the ticket out. They couldn’t have afforded

real jewelry.”

“Someone could have stolen something.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I do hope you’re not perpetuating the stereotype of carnies as dirty thieves.”

I winced, realizing how that had sounded. “Suggesting there was one thief doesn’t mean I’m painting all of them with the same brush. And someone’s stealing now, so it’s not unheard of in the general demographic.”

He nodded slowly. “True. So, you think there’s a real diamond out there, someone learned that, and now they’re trying to find it?”

“It’s a theory,” I said with a shrug. Then I asked something that would probably rile him just as badly. “Why are you so reluctant to admit that this might be a problem? Isn’t fighting crime your job? Are you trying to keep down your crime rate numbers, or something?”

Flushing red, he said, “No. I just don’t want to panic people or encourage copycats. Sometimes it’s better to handle things quietly instead of making a big fuss.”

“But you supposedly didn’t know about half these cases until after the article, so how could you have handled things at all, quietly or not?”

He sighed so deeply that I worried he was going to deflate. “I’m sorry, you’re right,” he said, wearily rubbing his hand over his face. “I was trying to keep the numbers in check. The boss has gone on an analytics kick. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to do anything about these cases. I really was already dealing with the ones I knew about. We’ve beefed up patrols in that neighborhood, both on foot and in vehicles. I’ve got people keeping an eye on pawn shops and auction sites. I just didn’t want any of this going on the record because the chief will flip out about the crime rate going up on his watch. He’ll come up with plans. There will be meetings. And reports. Charts, even. All that will take away from the time we have available to actually fight crime.”

I winced. “Sorry.”

“No, you were right that we needed to warn people, and we’ve learned that it’s bigger than we thought it was. I still don’t get it. You’d think after the first theft of something that ended up having no value, they’d have learned not to steal more of the same.”

“Maybe the new information coming in will help you get closer to catching the thieves. And maybe printing in the paper that the things they’re stealing are only of sentimental value will make them stop doing it.” I knew even as I said it that it probably wouldn’t work that way, not if the ghost was right and it *was* valuable. The question was, did the thieves know? Given how specific the thefts were, it was hard to imagine they didn’t.

“I’m setting up a crime watch meeting for the neighborhood on Monday night,” he said. “At least the publicity may get people to start actually locking their doors, and that should help.”

“I wish you’d told me in time to get it in today’s newspaper, like maybe when I saw you yesterday before the paper went to print.”

“I didn’t have it planned then. I put it together after all the phone calls came in today. It gave me something to tell people that made them feel like I was taking action.”

“How are people going to know about it if it’s not in the paper?”

He grinned and chuckled. “You’re new here, but I’m sure you’ve already noticed that word spreads pretty quickly. I’m telling the people who call, and they’ll tell other people. I’ve sent notices to the churches for them to announce Sunday morning. It’s on the police department’s social media accounts. By Monday night, the whole town will know.”

“You do social media?”

“One of our rookies does social media. Most people follow us to see pictures of his dog, but then they also see any important notices.”

“I should probably start accounts for the newspaper, but I don’t have a dog.”

"I understand cats work, too." He sat up straighter and shifted his shoulders. "What are you going to do about the crime stuff?"

"I'll cover your crime watch meeting, possibly interview some of the victims who are there. Maybe a few sob stories about losing Grandma's prize brooch that's worth nothing to anyone but the family will get under the thieves' skin and make them realize that they're not going to make any money from this."

"Let me know if you learn anything useful."

"Will do," I said, giving him a mock salute. He glared at me as he shoved himself out of the chair and left.

I was frankly a little disappointed that his reluctance was merely about avoiding writing reports for his boss. I knew the chief was a touchy subject for him, since his father had been the previous chief and he'd been groomed practically from birth to take over when his father retired. But his father had died before Wes had the experience to take over as chief, so they'd hired an outsider who seemed to be wavering between just coasting until retirement and remaking the department according to whatever article he'd read last. I had to admit that I'd been hoping Wes was trying to keep some mystical local secret from coming to light.

"What did Officer Handsome want?" Jean demanded as she appeared in the seat Wes had just vacated.

"He's mad that all these burglary reports are making the town look like a crime-infested hellhole while giving him more paperwork. Did you learn anything from your ghost friends about the jewelry?"

"Nobody I talked to knew anything, but they're going to talk to the people they know."

"There are cliques in the afterlife?"

"Do you walk up to strangers and start asking them questions?"

"Sometimes. It comes with the job."

"You talk to people you think will have the information you want. But if there are hundreds of people you don't know around, and there's nothing to tell you whether or not they might know

something, you can't just go asking everyone. In the afterlife, I know the people I knew in life or learned about some other way, like from editing the newspaper. If there's someone there from the sideshow before they came to town, I have no way of knowing who they are. And people's identities fade with time unless they make an effort to hang on, like I do."

"Maybe you could find Marybeth's grandmother's ghost and find out what she meant. I couldn't ask with Marybeth there."

"I'll look, but I'm not promising anything."

The calls slowed down late in the afternoon, and I finally got some peace in the evening before I went to bed. Then the phone woke me early Saturday. Generally, phone calls before six in the morning aren't good news, so I came instantly awake as I answered.

"I believe I've cracked the case," Wes's voice said into my ear, "and I'm sure you'll want to cover it."

Chapter Four

“**Y**ou did what?” I said, my heart sinking with disappointment that I’d missed out on solving the case. Then I wondered what was wrong with me. Catching criminals was his job. My job was to report on it, and I still had a story. There was nothing to feel disappointed about. In fact, him solving it proved I was right that there was something going on.

“I made an arrest in the thefts. Come to the station if you want the info.”

I was the only news media in town other than the high school paper, and that published even less frequently than my paper did, so I didn’t have to worry about being scooped, but I still jumped out of bed, threw on some clothes, and headed straight to the police station. When I arrived, the desk sergeant called to Wes, who took me to the briefing room to show off his haul. An entire folding table was covered in silver—flatware, tea sets, and trays. “We’ve already identified pieces from the Holtzes. The grandfather’s watch was in there, too,” he said. It might have been my imagination, but I thought his chest looked like it had puffed up a bit.

“Any of the other jewelry?” I asked.

“We’re still searching their vehicle and a couple of motel rooms in Waco, but it’s possible they ditched it when they realized it wasn’t valuable. It turns out that this was a ring being run out of Houston. They put up a website advertising individual pieces of

silver to fill out a set or replace missing pieces for patterns that aren't being produced anymore. If someone ordered a single spoon, say, the crooks figured that meant they had a set of that silver and made a good target."

"That's actually kind of clever, in a disturbing way. Didn't anyone make the connection?"

"It doesn't seem like it. They did ship the silver pieces, so no one felt ripped off by the site, and they didn't strike right away after the order. They built up a list, then when they had a decent number of targets in a particular area, they'd go there and hit all of them at once. They were staying in Waco and hitting the general central Texas area when we caught them last night."

"They were still in town?"

"Back in town. It looks like they'd hit someone else local not long before I caught them."

"How did you catch them?"

He didn't quite meet my eyes. "We got lucky. It was a traffic stop. I flashed my lights to pull them over when they ran a stop sign. Instead of pulling over, they took off, but they didn't know their way around town, so we were able to cut them off and stop them. We found a bunch of silver in their car that matched the description from a burglary that had just been called in. Their hotel keys helped us find the rest of their stash, along with their records. They were pretty meticulous about tracking their operation." He gave a bigger grin and said, "Who's the lucky one now?"

"Lucky Wesley doesn't have the same ring to it." I wasn't as ready as he was to call this a closed case. The silver seemed like an entirely different issue from the jewelry. But it was a bigger crime that made a great story, and I wasn't the only one who thought so. The police department held a news conference that afternoon, and the briefing room was full. Not only was I there with one of the freelance photographers who worked with my paper, but there were reporters from the Waco paper, several of the neighboring

small towns, and even my former employer from Dallas. A couple of the Waco TV stations had sent camera crews. This was a genuine event, which meant I wouldn't get much useful information out of it. Teasing Wes or pushing him about the missing jewelry would be unfair in front of all those reporters and his boss.

Because of course the chief was there. Normally he hid in his office and let Wes do all the work, but he was front-and-center today, in full dress uniform. Wes stood just behind him, but still managed to eclipse his boss. The chief spoke first, standing next to the table full of silver as he described the arrest. I noticed that he used the word "we" a lot, implying that he was part of the bust.

"What an utter waste," someone near me muttered, and I turned to see a man in a police uniform leaning against the back wall of the briefing room. I knew Wes didn't have a lot of respect for his boss, but I was surprised to hear such open disdain from a uniformed officer in a setting like this. In fact, it was so odd that I gave the disgruntled cop another look. His outline was a bit hazy, he wore the chief's insignia, and his nameplate said "Mosby." I guessed he was the ghost of Wes's father, still haunting the police station.

That was more interesting to me than the silver scheme, but it would have looked really odd if I ignored the news conference to talk to the back wall, so I forced myself to face forward and pay attention. One of the TV reporters in front asked a question that the chief couldn't answer, so he had Wes step up and speak. Wes told a much more carefully worded story than he'd given me that morning about how he caught the thieves, and he avoided looking directly at anyone the entire time. I got the impression that he was either lying or telling a partial truth, and it was most distinct when he talked about how he noticed the suspects. I wondered if he'd been suspicious of them earlier but had no good reason to pull them over until they broke a traffic law. They'd helped his case by running, which gave probable cause for searching the car.

"So you were really lucky," the reporter who'd asked the

question said.

“I suppose so,” Wes replied, blushing. “I thought I was just dealing with a moving violation, but it turned out there was more to it. The moral of the story is that you should obey all traffic laws after committing burglary.”

The audience chuckled, and the ghost behind me muttered, “Lucky, my ass. Too bad you can’t tell them how you figured it out, but that would never hold up in court.”

Now I was *really* curious. Unfortunately, I couldn’t ask the ghost about it. I wondered if he even realized I could hear him. The odds were good that he knew the newspaper editor needed to be able to talk to ghosts, since his mother was on the board and he’d known the editor who took over from Jean, but he might not have known I was the new editor. I hadn’t seen him before around the station, so I didn’t know how connected he still was to what went on. It was sweet that he’d shown up to see his son get partial credit for a big bust, but it didn’t look like he was trying to keep running things the way Jean did. I couldn’t think of a way to be alone in the police station and be sure the former chief’s ghost showed up. It was a pity I couldn’t have a silent telepathic conversation with a ghost.

But I couldn’t, so all I could do was listen to Chief Mosby mutter about his successor through the rest of the news conference. I already had the full story, so I was mostly there to represent the town and glean anything I could from the questions other reporters, who didn’t have to live with the fallout, asked. I began taking more detailed notes when the representative of the FBI took the floor. The silver scheme had been a multistate operation, with victims across the country, so Wes’s bust had solved a bunch of cases. The thieves’ apartment in Houston had been raided, and the feds had found even more silver. It seemed they were letting the cases go colder before they tried selling their haul, other than the odd piece used to fulfill an order when they found a new victim.

Mrs. Holtz spoke about how glad she was to get her silver and

her grandfather's watch back. I noticed that no one had yet mentioned costume jewelry, so I was increasingly certain that this was a different case entirely from the one I was investigating.

The news conference broke up, and Chief Mosby vanished. I wished I could when my former colleague, still working for my old paper, spotted me and approached. "Hey, Lex, what are you doing here?" Pete West asked. His smile looked friendly enough, but I could sense the smug beneath it. "Don't tell me you ended up reporting here in the sticks."

"More like editing in the sticks. I run the local paper here." Well, with the help of a ghost. "But I get to take the big stories." As though there was anyone else to take them.

"Wow, that was fast. You really landed on your feet."

It was my turn to be a bit smug. "They recruited me before I even made it to my car after the layoff."

"How did they find you?"

"Turns out they had their eye on me, thanks to something I wrote that got picked up by one of the wire services." I didn't add that it had more to do with evidence I could talk to ghosts than with my writing ability.

"Well, congrats. And you already have a big story."

"It's not my first. I had a murder my first week on the job. Small towns aren't as sleepy as you'd think."

"I may come calling you for a job when they do the next round of cuts."

"What I need now is a secretary more than another reporter. How good are you at making tea and answering phones?"

He laughed and moved on to accost the FBI representative. I went over to Mrs. Holtz. "You got everything back?" I asked.

"Looks like it, though they're holding on to it as evidence for now. I don't use the silver that often, so I won't need it until Thanksgiving. I'm most glad about the watch. They let me have that since it's of minor importance to the case." She wrapped her hand around her wrist, clasping the watch.

“May I see it?” I asked, and she removed her hand to show the watch to me. There was a tiny crystal chip where the twelve would usually go. The silver thieves wouldn’t have taken it for that reason, but I did wonder if there was a link between that watch and the other stolen items. “Oh, wow, that is old,” I said, though I actually knew next to nothing about watches. “It’s in pretty good shape.”

“Other than the fact that it doesn’t run. They’d have to completely gut it to make it work, and then it wouldn’t be the same watch anymore. I use a Fitbit, so there’s no point in fixing it. I just like having it.”

I couldn’t think of a way to ask if her grandfather had been connected to the sideshow without it coming out of nowhere and sounding rude, so I left it alone, instead getting a statement from her for the paper. I also got quotes from the FBI representative and the current chief. The former chief hadn’t returned. Not that I could have quoted him.

The other reporters all had tighter deadlines than I did, so they took off fairly quickly. With the press gone, the chief skedaddled back to his office, leaving Wes to supervise the silver being taken into evidence by the feds. I made sure my photographer had all the shots I might need before I went back to the office and wrote the article, getting a jump on the next issue.

For dinner, I went to Margarita’s, down the block from the office. It was the local gathering spot, but it was even more crowded than usual that night. “Hey, Lexie!” Margarita called out when I entered. “Welcome to our watch party.”

“Watching what?” The TV over the bar showed a college basketball game.

“The news about Wes’s big bust.”

Gathering at a restaurant to watch a news story like it was the big game was a new experience for me, but I figured I might as well, so I took a seat at the bar and ordered my usual combo plate. The regulars were all there—Margarita running things behind the

bar, Jordan, Ruthie the artist from across the street, Danny the schoolteacher. The only one missing was the guest of honor. I'd noticed that Wes hated crowds. He only showed up at the restaurant during slow periods, either very early or very late. I wondered if he even knew that the townspeople were gathering to watch the news.

Much to my surprise, he did show up. He glanced around the room anxiously, and I thought for a moment that he'd bolt right back out the door, but he wove his way around the tables in the middle of the room to take the seat next to me at the bar. "They didn't have to make all this fuss," he muttered.

"It's not just about you. Seeing the town on TV is pretty cool," I said.

"But they're showing the town as a place where crime happened. That's not putting us in our best light."

"They're showing the town as a place where crimes that happened all over the country were stopped, thanks to the alert eyes of our local police department."

He glanced away from me at that. "Okay, what aren't you telling me?" I asked. "How did you come to notice those guys? It wasn't just that they ran a stop sign, was it? You were already following them." Remembering what his father's ghost had said, I added, "You had suspicions, but they weren't good enough to allow you to stop and search them, and that's why you were watching them. But I'm curious why you were suspicious."

He shrugged. "It was just a hunch." The fact that he'd answered that way seemed to confirm my guess that he'd been watching them for something other than bad driving. He hadn't denied it.

"But no jewelry returned other than the watch, and most of the people with stolen jewelry didn't have missing silver, so I think there are two different kinds of crime going on."

"This one was a federal case, a felony. Stolen costume jewelry isn't such a big deal."

"Surely busting the silver ring will balance your statistics."

“Hey, everyone, the national news is on,” Margarita called out. She turned up the volume on the TV, and everyone looked up. The first few stories were about politics and disasters, then before a commercial break the anchor teased a story about a sterling arrest in a small Texas town. The assembled crowd cheered, and Wes ducked his head. During the commercial break, Margarita took Wes’s order, then had her staff come out of the kitchen to watch the story. It was just a short clip showing the pile of silver as the anchor told us about the crime ring and how it was broken up. When the story ended, the crowd cheered again, and Margarita muted the TV. “The local story will be bigger,” she said.

We received our meals just before the local Waco news came on. This time, the story led the newscast, and it was a full piece, with plenty of footage of the town, looking peaceful, before showing clips from the news conference. Wes looked rather dashing on the screen as he explained the arrest, and I patted him on the shoulder. “A star is born,” I joked.

“I hope not.”

“You’d probably better brace yourself. You’ll be getting calls from all over the world after this—until something else happens to distract them so they’re chasing after the next shiny object.”

“You sound pretty cynical about your profession.”

“Not so much the profession itself as the priorities of the people who are in charge now.”

“I won’t have to worry about it. The boss will be sure to take care of any national attention.”

“Oh, but I’m sure they’ll all want to talk to that heroic policeman,” Margarita said, leaning on the bar in front of him.

“It’ll blow over,” he said dismissively.

“I just hate that I’m being scooped by the guy who used to be my rival in my old job,” I said. “He’ll have an edition coming out tomorrow and probably already has it on their website. My story won’t come out for almost a week.”

Wes left as soon as he finished eating and got a round of

applause as he approached the door. I lingered a while longer, moving over to join Jordan and Ruthie at the other end of the bar. “How does it feel not to be the biggest news in town?” I teased Jordan.

“You know, I’m a little insulted that neither of those stories identified Stirling Mills as ‘hometown of software tycoon Jordan Randall.’ But, seriously, anything that gets the name of the town out will help. Maybe someone will come visit out of curiosity or see the sign as they drive through the area and decide to stop by. And that brings in money, which might lure more businesses. It’s all good.”

“Dude, do you ever stop thinking about business and money?” Ruthie asked.

“I guess I am a little obsessed,” he said with a laugh. “But I got where I am now by being able to find the opportunity in everything.”

I chatted with them until they finished their meals, then we all left the restaurant together. I crossed the street to head home while Jordan stuck by Ruthie’s side as she navigated the sidewalk on crutches and her prosthetic legs. I wondered if those two were an item or if Jordan was merely being a gentleman.

I’d locked the newspaper office from the inside, so I had to go to the rear entrance of my apartment, which meant going down a side street and then around to the back of the block. The sun was setting, but there was still enough light to see my way, even though the side streets weren’t as well-lit as Main Street. I knew I was probably pretty safe in this town. The recent thefts aside, there wasn’t a lot of crime, and the last violent crimes had happened in my office. Still, I thought as I rounded the corner into the alley that led to the entrance to my apartment, I needed to reconsider how I left when I went out at night. It was a pain to deal with the security system in the newspaper office, but coming and going that way was probably better than walking down an alley.

As if to prove my point, a figure ahead of me emerged from the

shadows of the alley, approaching the rear of the newspaper office.

Chapter Five

I'd just told myself that this town was safe, but I still froze. Even if I'd wanted to move, I couldn't have. All I could think about was the time about a month earlier when I'd felt like someone was following me at night, and I'd been pretty sure it was a killer. That same killer had actually attacked me in my office later. I could feel his hands on my throat even now. I'd been in danger then because I'd investigated a murder. Now I was exposing a theft ring. Were the thieves coming after me?

I pulled myself together and started to back away. Before I'd taken two steps, I realized that the shadowy figure had also frozen. I couldn't see a lot of details in the dim light, but the person was slim and not too tall. I got the impression it was a woman. She had a hood pulled up, so I couldn't see hair or face. And it looked like she was carrying a box of some sort.

Abruptly, she whirled and fled down the alley. Realizing she probably wasn't out to hurt me if she was running away from me, I chased her. Curiosity overtook fear, and I wanted to know who this was and what she was up to.

Unfortunately, she had a head start and was pretty fast. I've never been much of a runner, and I'd just eaten a big meal. There's a reason you don't hear about runners enchilada loading before a big race. Before I got to the end of the block, I was huffing and puffing and I had a stitch in my side. The fugitive was nowhere in sight. I couldn't tell which way she'd gone—across the street and

down the alley or around the corner. There was something on the ground, though, something that glittered in the light from a nearby streetlamp.

I slowed to a walk, pressing my hand against the pain in my side. Something else shone a few feet beyond the first bit of glitter. I got out my phone and turned on the flashlight function, revealing a peacock brooch on the sidewalk. The thing beyond that was another brooch. I waved the light around and saw a box lying on the ground, like it had been dropped. More jewelry spilled out of the box.

I knew better than to touch it, but I knelt to get a better look. It looked like what Marybeth had described as her stolen jewelry box, and the peacock brooch must have been one of her missing pieces. The other brooch was a lot like my doodle of the one a caller had described to me.

I called Wes directly rather than going through dispatch, mostly because I wanted to let him know that I'd told him so. "You know all that missing jewelry that wasn't among the stash of stuff you found with that silver bust?" I said when he answered.

"Yeah."

"I found it."

"You found it? Where?"

I had to take a moment to get my bearings. I was a block past the newspaper office, and they started the alphabet street names at the railroad tracks. "On Avenue E, near the alley."

"Don't touch anything. I'll be right there."

The police SUV arrived a minute or so later. Wes got out of the truck and pointed his industrial-strength flashlight at the box. The jewelry glistened in the light. "Huh," he said. "And it was just there?"

"Someone dropped it." I told him about seeing the person in the alley and giving chase. "I don't know whether she was taking it somewhere and accidentally dropped it or if she was bringing it back and planning to leave it somewhere and ran when she saw

me.”

“She?”

“It’s hard to tell because I didn’t get a great look and she was wearing a hooded sweatshirt, but I’m pretty sure it was a woman, based on the build and the way she ran. And probably pretty young, or at least fit.”

“You should have called me instead of chasing her yourself.”

“It was instinct. When someone starts to run as soon as they see you, you want to find out why. At any rate, it looks like your silver guys weren’t involved with the jewelry, since they’re in jail right now.”

“Unless they had an accomplice.”

“Oh, come on. That’s a real stretch. Why would they bother having an accomplice take the risk of bringing back a box of costume jewelry after they’d already been caught with silver? More likely, our thief saw the story about the silver on TV, realized those guys would have only gotten a traffic ticket if they hadn’t had the loot on them, and ditched their evidence.”

“Likely,” he admitted. “Did you touch it?”

“Nope. I know that much.”

“I’ll get a team here to collect evidence.” He glanced around. “I’ll have to see if there are any security cameras in the alley.”

I winced at the idea of him seeing video of me running. I really needed to get in better shape. Did this town have a gym? “I don’t think you’d get anything. You wouldn’t be able to see her face, the way she had her hood.”

“This is a small town. I know almost everyone. I might recognize something about her. I wonder if she was bringing the jewelry to you, planning to leave it so you’d find it. But why run and then dump it here?”

“I don’t think she expected me to catch her. She took off when she saw me, and she must have dropped the box as soon as she rounded the corner. That was where I lost her.”

“Could have been someone who was in the restaurant and saw

you there, so they didn't expect you to be home." He knelt and aimed his flashlight at the jewelry that had spilled out of the box. "I don't know why anyone would steal this stuff. You'd have to be pretty dumb to think this was valuable at all. Look, most of these pieces are missing stones, and they probably weren't great to begin with."

"Missing stones?"

"There are gaps with empty settings."

"Maybe the stones are what the thief wanted."

"You still think there's a diamond in our midst?"

"They brought back the jewelry, but stones are missing. It would probably be a lot safer to take a bunch of loose stones to be appraised to find out if one of them's a diamond than to bring in a bunch of easily identifiable jewelry."

"That does make sense."

"Wow, you actually agreed with me? This is a red-letter day. Anyway, I'm sure all those people will be glad to get their things back."

"I'll call them," he said, his tone firm enough for me to get the message that he wanted me to stay out of it. "We'll need to dust for prints to see if we can find a culprit before we start giving things back."

"Of course. The case isn't over until we've found a thief."

"Until *we've* found a thief. Meaning the police, not you. You can write about it after the police wrap up the case."

I still felt like there was more to this. Would a diamond be enough to make a ghost upset? There had to be a reason the thief wanted this jewelry, and it had to have something to do with the town's history. Without resolving that issue, this case wouldn't be closed. I needed to keep digging.

MY BRAIN WAS SO busy working over what little I knew about the

jewelry that I didn't sleep well that night. The common denominator among all the thefts seemed to be the sideshow. Wes might have dismissed that connection, but I felt it was a vital clue. Did the gems have something to do with the uncanny abilities some of the sideshow people had? Did their powers reside in the jewels? Maybe someone was collecting the jewels in order to amass power. I didn't know nearly enough about the sideshow, and it was a touchy enough subject that I hesitated to ask about it. But the town did have a sideshow museum. That would be a good starting point. I needed to learn about the town, anyway, and there was always a chance that there would be a ghost hanging around who could give me some useful information that would point me in the right direction.

Nothing was likely to be open on a Sunday until the afternoon, so I went to church that morning. I hadn't always been much of a churchgoer, but in this town not going would have stood out. I was making my way through all the churches in town to find the one where I fit the best. After church and lunch, I headed out. There were actually a few tourists wandering the picturesque downtown area. At least, I assumed they were tourists. I didn't know everyone in town, but they were taking photos of the restored old buildings and peering through the windows of the art galleries on Main Street, so I doubted they were local. I wondered if the story on the news the night before had brought in visitors.

The museum was at the end of downtown where the train tracks were. Passenger rail service had ended decades ago, causing a decline of the downtown area that had lasted until the recent restoration. The former passenger depot now served as the town museum, with the sideshow museum in an old rail car parked on a siding in front of the depot. It looked like it once must have had a paint job similar to that on the car now serving as a diner, but the formerly bright paint was faded and stained.

I climbed the short flight of steps to the platform and tried to open the door to the car, but it didn't budge. I'd have thought the

museum would be open on a Sunday afternoon, a prime time for tourists. I leaned my forehead against one of the windows and shaded my eyes with my hands to try to see inside. It didn't look like any lights were on. Maybe you had to get someone in the main museum to open it. I turned to the depot door. It was locked, too. I went around to the other side, where the depot faced the street. A sign on that door gave the museum's operating hours, with a note at the bottom specifying that the museum would open when staff was available. In other words, the museum was open when it was open. I suspected it was run by volunteers. I'd have to call someone to get it opened for me.

Then again, the museum didn't have to be open for me to talk to any ghosts who might be hanging around. The sideshow troupe had been living out of these train cars for decades before they got stranded in Stirling Mills when the show's owner went bankrupt and skipped town. That meant there was a chance of a ghost still being attached to the car from the days before it came here.

I went back around to the side of the platform where the car was and stood on the small metal step in front of the door, so I was touching the car. "Hello! Is anyone here?" I asked. "If you want to talk, I can hear you."

Nothing. If there was a ghost, either it wasn't very chatty or it didn't come outside.

Although I was hoping for a ghost, I just about leapt out of my skin when the depot door opened and a woman—a living one—peered out. "Oh, I did hear someone outside. Did you want to see the sideshow museum?"

"If it's not too much trouble," I said.

"No trouble at all. That's what we're here for." She stepped outside and locked the door behind her. I had a hard time guessing her age. She had frizzy white hair, but the slim-fitting tunic and leggings she wore revealed a figure a teenager would envy, and she moved with a dancer's grace when she crossed the platform to the museum car. "We don't get a lot of visitors," she said over her

shoulder as she flipped through the keys on her ring. It took her two tries to find the right key to open the car, and she bounded up the steps into it, gesturing for me to follow her.

While she fumbled for a light switch, I looked around the interior of the car, my eyes adjusting to the relative dimness. I blinked when bright lights abruptly came on. "There!" the woman said in triumph. "I knew it was around there somewhere. Oh, you're the new newspaper editor, aren't you?"

"Yes." I held my hand out to shake hers. "Lexie Lincoln."

"Lenora Ellis. You're working on a story?" Her face lit up.

I didn't want to raise false hopes. "I'm just trying to learn more about the town."

She wilted ever so slightly. "Oh. Well, I suppose this is an important part of the town's history. We should probably do more with it, but there are some who don't want to make that big a deal out of it. They're afraid of turning us into a freak show."

"I can understand, to some degree," I said. "But I do think it might add a point of interest for tourists." I began studying the exhibits, hoping Lenora would get the message and leave me alone. Instead, she hovered just behind me, which was unnerving. I'd have been more comfortable with a ghost.

There wasn't much to the museum. On display boards down the center of the car were posters advertising the sideshow. One promoted The Astonishing Corelli Sisters with an illustration of young women in tights performing impossible poses. "That's my grandmother," Lenora said, pointing to one of the women. She proceeded to raise her leg to the point it was almost vertical, her knee against her ear. "I've still got it!"

"I'm impressed," I said. "The talent seems to run in the family."

"That and daily stretching workouts starting practically at birth. My sisters and I and our daughters and granddaughters still do an act at town festivals." She lowered her leg slowly, demonstrating a remarkable degree of control.

Another poster featured The Amazing Crenshaw and showed a

man wearing a turban with a large gem set in it. According to the poster, he was a hypnotist who could sway anyone to do his will. I wondered if that gem might have something to do with the stones in the stolen jewelry. “The turban itself is over here,” Lenora said, pointing to a glass display case that sat in front of one of the train windows.

The turban was a lot shabbier than it looked in the poster, but then it was nearly a hundred years older now—if it had ever actually looked anything like the poster. It had faded to a blotchy, washed-out purple, and there were sweat stains around the edge where it had rested on the wearer’s forehead. There was absolutely no doubt that the huge gem set in it was fake. I didn’t know a lot about gemstones, but even I could tell that anything that yellowed and cracked wasn’t a real diamond hiding in plain sight. That case contained some other bits of costume, including a scarf worn by the fortune-teller, as well as the fortune-teller’s crystal ball.

The nearest display board contained photos depicting these acts. The actual Amazing Crenshaw didn’t appear nearly as exotic as the one on the poster. Without the turban, he looked like a fairly average man of that era, with slicked-down hair that made his ears look large. The fortune-teller looked a lot like the descendants I knew: Margarita and her grandmother, Lupe. She wore a jeweled tiara set on top of a scarf that flowed down her back and around her shoulders. That was the scarf in the display case, but I didn’t see the tiara.

The rest of the display boards contained photos of the troupe in action or behind the scenes, out of costume. It was interesting seeing the contrast between these people when they were in character and performing and when they were just living their lives. I’d seen pictures of the troupe before, since they were displayed in businesses around the town, but some of these went back even before their arrival in town. One in particular caught my eye. It was a group portrait of about twenty women. They were dressed in their Sunday best from what looked like the mid-1920s,

wearing cloche hats and ankle-length dresses with low, loose waistbands. I recognized a couple of the brooches they wore from the stash that had been returned. The women didn't look too familiar, other than Margarita's ancestor, whose darker skin and sharp cheekbones were apparently dominant traits. If you didn't know the context, these might have been any women posing for a group photo.

They weren't smiling. They looked deadly serious. I bent closer and saw that there was a caption handwritten in pencil at the bottom of the photo, almost obscured by the frame. It read, "The day of the Pact."

"Do you know what pact this was?" I asked Lenora, pointing to the photo.

She squinted and leaned closer to read the caption. "Huh. Funny, I never noticed that before. I have no idea. I think my family joined the troupe a little after that, so they aren't in that photo. My grandmother and her sisters were ordinary girls from the Midwest who happened to be really flexible, and they ran away to join the sideshow instead of getting married to farmers. Their parents disowned them, but they found a new family in the troupe. They did end up marrying farmers after they came here, but I like to think they were more interesting farmers. And they got to see the country first. When I was a kid, I was mad that no sideshows came through town for me to run away with. I waited by the train tracks for weeks. Maybe that's why I volunteer here now. I'm still waiting."

"And still stretching," I couldn't resist remarking.

"That, too. I'll be ready if that show ever does come through."

Unfortunately, her knowledge didn't go back far enough to be of much use, but I felt like I'd learned something from finding that photo. Now I needed to find someone who knew about the pact.

Chapter Six

I felt a thrill of anticipation Monday night as I climbed the stairs of the library building to the community room on the upper floor. This kind of town meeting was a staple of the TV movies I loved, only on TV they tended to be about things like the Christmas festival rather than about crime. Still, I figured that a crime wave consisting of thefts of costume jewelry was low enough stakes to give me the right vibe without shattering the illusion of an idyllic town.

The community room lived up to all my expectations. It was an impressive space that had either been carefully maintained or lovingly restored because I doubted it looked too different now from when it was built in the early years of the last century. The ceiling soared, with a couple of chandeliers hanging overhead, and there were tall, arched windows down the sides of the room. Red velvet drapes framed a small stage at the front of the room, and rows of metal folding chairs had been set up on the polished wooden floor. Even though I was early, the seats were already half-full.

Wes and a couple of other cops stood on the floor in front of the stage. Wes was frowning in a way that made him look like he had a migraine. I got the impression he was barely stopping himself from running out of the room with his hands clapped over his ears. If he couldn't handle a crowded restaurant, this sort of thing was probably his idea of hell.

While I waited for the meeting to begin, I scanned the crowd, looking for anyone who might be a ghost. After spotting the former chief during the news conference, I thought it would be a good idea to figure out whether the people around me were actually living before I had to worry about whether or not I should speak to them. The tricky thing was that about half the people in the room could have been ghosts, based on what I'd seen of ghosts so far. A number wore clothes or hairstyles from another decade, and several of the people looked so faded as to almost be transparent. I was fairly certain that the women in the front row wearing white suits and Gibson Girl hairstyles were specters of a long-ago women's suffrage rally, but just when I decided that the woman in the row ahead of me who looked like she'd stepped out of a magazine from the seventies had to be a ghost, someone spoke to her and they started a conversation.

Next, I tried looking for anyone—dead or alive—who resembled any of the women in the pact photo. I didn't see any obvious ghosts who looked like them, and comparing the living to my mental image of the photo proved to be impossible. A few generations removed, plus different clothes and hairstyles, changed people enough that I couldn't see a connection. Not to mention that I was going off a memory of a black-and-white image. I wished I'd thought to take a picture of the photo with my phone so I'd have something to refer to.

Evelyn Novak, the newspaper board president, entered five minutes before the meeting and took the seat next to me. By the time the meeting began, it was standing room only. I got the impression that a good percentage of the town was present, and not just the people in the affected neighborhood. "Good turnout," Evelyn noted.

"Impressive civic engagement," I said with a nod.

"People will show up for things that affect them directly." She sighed. "If only voter turnout was like this. Then again, this is about the percentage of the town's total population that shows up

to vote. Probably the same people, too.”

The police chief was just about the last person to arrive, and I got the impression from the way Wes and the other cops reacted that they hadn’t been expecting him and weren’t exactly thrilled with his presence. Without even acknowledging his people, the chief went to the front of the room, faced the crowd, and signaled for silence. The roar of conversation gradually died as people noticed him. Two older ladies in the back row were the last to realize the meeting had begun, continuing their conversation so loudly that we could all hear what the doctor said about that odd mole until someone on their row tapped one of them on the shoulder and they realized they had an audience.

“Thank you all for coming,” the chief said. “It’s good to see the community coming together. There are only so many of us on the police force, but with all of you helping, giving us more eyes and ears, we can make a big impact in preventing crime. Fortunately, you’re all a lot safer now that we’ve caught the criminals. But that doesn’t mean you can stop taking precautions and looking out for each other. Now, Lieutenant Mosby, what do you have for us?”

I had to reassess my view of how much Wes disliked me once I saw what it looked like when he really glared at someone. His usual scowls were a lot friendlier compared to the look he gave the chief. “Thank you, Chief,” he said. The chill in his voice was so strong that I shivered and glanced to either side to make sure a ghost wasn’t near me. “We may have caught one set of criminals, but that was part of a highly targeted ring. You would only have been affected by them if you’d bought a piece of silver to fill out your set from that particular website. I’m more concerned about the thefts of jewelry and other keepsakes that have been happening recently. While most of the pieces that were taken have been found, we haven’t caught those culprits, and we don’t know why they were taking these things. They may be looking for something in particular that they haven’t found yet.”

“It’s those outsiders,” a man near the front of the room said.

“We bring in all these new people, and crime goes up.”

I couldn't help but flinch as my image of the perfect little town shattered. I knew intellectually that there would be conflicts and prejudices in any town, and I'd seen evidence of that in the letters to the editor, but this was the first time I'd been confronted with it in person. This was no longer the kind of town meeting in movies. They just disagreed about whether the festival could go on if they couldn't find the perfect Christmas tree.

“The silver thieves were outsiders, but they hadn't come to live here,” Wes said. “From what we can tell, the jewelry thieves are targeting families descended from the sideshow people, and they're taking jewelry, mostly keepsakes from a few generations back. That suggests that they're local and have some link to the sideshow. These thefts don't seem to be about money because the items they're taking have only sentimental value.”

A woman a few rows ahead of me said, “Those carnies have always been nothing but trouble. They're thieves and always have been.”

“It's not my kid who got picked up for shoplifting at the dollar store, Karen,” a woman across the aisle snapped.

“Seriously, it's been ninety years,” someone else said. “Most of us have never been near a sideshow. And we're the ones who are the victims here.”

A shouting match ensued, with people on both sides of the issue putting in their points of view. It got to be so chaotic that I lost track of who was on which side. My heart sank at the realization that these conflicts were still so close to the surface, generations later. It was so discouraging. Here I thought I'd found the rare place where differences were accepted.

This was usually the point in the movie when the heroine would stand up and make an impassioned speech that brought the community together. I didn't think it was really my place, unless maybe as an outsider I could bring a new perspective. I was still thinking about what I could say when a voice broke through the

cacophony, shouting, “People, please! Settle down!” Surprisingly, everyone did, and the room went silent. The speaker was Ashley Parker, wife of the former preacher I’d suspected of the murder of the previous newspaper editor. Having been the target of a misaimed tirade from her, I never would have imagined her being the voice of reason. “Come now, we’re all neighbors here,” she said. “Attacking each other won’t do any good. Let’s see what the police have to say.” A couple of people applauded softly, but everyone turned their attention back to the front of the room. I supposed she still had the social clout of a preacher’s wife, even though her husband had disgraced himself by embezzling from the church to fund his extramarital affair.

“Thank you, Ashley,” Wes said. “We appreciate any tips if you know who might be behind these thefts, but only if they’re based on actual information. Vague suspicions and groundless accusations don’t help us.”

While he spoke, a group of figures came on stage behind him. I thought at first it might be a prank, but when no one else reacted, I realized I was seeing ghosts. The figures wore Grecian-style gowns and posed as though they were figures painted on ancient vases. I recalled reading that tableaux had once been a popular form of entertainment, back before television when people had to create their own fun. I supposed the resident ghosts noticed an audience and came out to perform. I had to bite my tongue to keep myself from laughing at the sheer lunacy of ghosts acting out scenes that had been painted on urns while Wes talked to the townspeople about crime prevention.

“We’re continuing to investigate this, but we need you to practice common sense,” he said. “Lock your doors, front and back, at night and when you’re away from home. It might be a good idea to keep your doors locked when you’re at home so no one can sneak in while you’re in another part of the house. Even if your jewelry isn’t valuable, if you have anything you want to keep safe, hide it in a secure place. You don’t have to buy a safe, but make it

harder on the thieves. Don't leave your jewelry box out on a dresser. Hide it in a drawer or put it in the back of your closet. Look out for each other. If you see someone going into your neighbor's backyard when you know your neighbor isn't home, call the police. Call us if you see anything suspicious."

"But what if the thief is someone we know from the neighborhood?" an audience member asked. I turned to see that it was Marybeth. "They have to be local if they're targeting the sideshow families. How will we know whether it's a neighbor stopping by to visit or the thief?"

"That does make things more difficult," Wes acknowledged. "We don't want to become so paranoid that we suspect our neighbors, but we're not going to catch this thief by assuming that anyone we know can't be a suspect. Look for things that are out of place, someone at the home of a person they don't normally socialize with, someone at a house when the residents are away. When in doubt, call us and let us sort it out."

The woman who'd said the sideshow people were criminals raised her hand and asked, "Should we be armed?"

"That's what I've been afraid of," Evelyn muttered under her breath.

Wes had fair skin, but he went even paler, so pale that his slight dusting of freckles that were usually barely visible stood out in sharp contrast to his ashen skin. Behind him, the ghosts struck a dramatic pose on the stage.

"That's within your rights," he said, weighing his words carefully. "And, technically, according to Texas law, if someone is in your home uninvited and you feel threatened, you have the right to defend yourself. However, this thief has injured no one so far. These crimes aren't even felonies. You'd be essentially giving the death penalty to someone for petty theft. A few pieces of costume jewelry aren't worth taking a life."

The crowd's reaction was divided. About half nodded in agreement while the other half scowled. I wasn't sure which part

they disagreed with, the idea that it was a homeowner's right to defend his property or the idea that petty theft wasn't worth a death sentence.

"But it's not just thieves who'd be at risk," Wes went on. "This has always been the kind of town where neighbors drop in through the kitchen door. I don't think any of you want to risk shooting someone who stopped by to drop off a plate of cookies. A castle defense might be on shaky ground if you shot someone you've previously allowed to enter your home without knocking. There could also be some civil liability there. I beg all of you to use common sense. If you have firearms, use them responsibly. I don't want to have to investigate a death. Meanwhile, with the concerns at this time, it would be wise to knock when you visit someone, and go to the front door so we don't have to worry about figuring out the difference between someone going around to the back because that's how neighbors visit and someone sneaking in through the back door to commit burglary."

"I'm not sure my front door even works. I don't remember the last time I opened it," someone in the crowd said, and everyone chuckled. That broke the tension in the room somewhat. It also gave me the chance to laugh openly before I exploded from holding in my giggles about the ghostly performance taking place on the stage. Either I was the only one in the crowd who could see ghosts or any others like me had amazing powers of self-control if they weren't having hysterics over that.

Most of Wes's color had returned, and he sounded more relaxed when he spoke again. "We're hoping that this is a temporary situation. There's no need to install security systems or lights, but if you've got them, use them. Most of the break-ins have happened during the day, and none have happened while people were home. The thieves are either keeping a close eye on their targets before they break in or they know their targets' habits well."

An older lady stood up and faced the room, turning her head to make sure everyone got a taste of her glare. "I have to say that this

whole thing makes me *furious*. It has to be one of us, and it's utterly shameful that someone in this town is preying upon friends and neighbors. They're taking things that mean something to us, that are of no value to anyone else. *Shame* on you, whoever you are. Shame! I don't know what you're up to, but stop it, now!"

There was a muttering of agreement among the crowd, along with a lot of nodding. Wes winced and shook his head, probably worried about what that scolding would set off. He scanned the crowd, watching the reaction.

"I bet it's kids," a white-haired man said. "They probably thought the old stuff was valuable and dumped it when they learned it wasn't. Kids these days have no respect for other people's property. They just want money for drugs." Only a few people agreed with that.

"We can't make assumptions about who it is," Wes said. "It looks like the thief is looking for something in particular, and maybe they won't even know what it is until they find it. It might help us if any of you know any family history about jewelry that might have some kind of value or meaning. Is there a piece that was owned by a sideshow performer that someone else might have reason to want?" I perked up at that. It was exactly the sort of information I was looking for.

Unfortunately, no one raised their hands or stood up to speak. I didn't even spot anyone giving a knowing nod or looking uncomfortable.

"What about our things that you've recovered?" Marybeth asked.

"We're still processing them as evidence," Wes said. "We're hoping to get some fingerprints, and we're photographing everything. Then we'll have to determine which pieces belong to which people, since they were all mixed together. It'll help if you can make a list of what you're missing, with as good a description as you can give. If you've got photos of your missing pieces, that will really help."

"If we haven't been hit yet, should we take inventory and take pictures?" a woman asked.

"We encourage people to make an inventory of household valuables, regardless," Wes said. "Since we know that people are stealing items that you might not normally think of as valuable for insurance purposes, it might be a good idea to make a list and photograph anything you have before you hide it. Are there any other questions?"

When no one asked anything else, he said, "I don't think anyone's in danger. As I said, the thieves only seem to strike when no one is home. They haven't hurt anyone yet. They've returned what they took. There's no reason to panic. The crime rate in this town is still rather low. This seems to be a very specific crime, aimed at a particular goal. They might even be done. When we catch the perpetrator, we'll probably go back to our usual ways. I still think you should lock your doors because that makes my job easier, but you shouldn't live in fear." He paused and looked around, giving the opportunity for further questions. When there were none, he said, "Thank you all for coming out tonight. Please call the police department if you see anything suspicious. I'd rather get a lot of calls about things that turn out to be nothing than miss something that turns out to be critical."

There was a polite round of applause, and the ghosts on the stage took their bows before disappearing. I wondered if the chance to perform one more time before an audience and receive applause had allowed them to move on to the next plane of the afterlife or if they'd continue to haunt this place and come out again the next time there was an audience.

Those who had questions went forward to talk to Wes. Meanwhile, the rest of the crowd filed out. Marybeth came over to me. "I want to thank you for getting the word out about the thefts. If you hadn't printed that article, we wouldn't have had this meeting, and we probably wouldn't have had our things returned."

"You were the one who called me," I pointed out. "I can't write

anything if no one tells me. Thank you for the tip.”

While we were talking, Ashley pushed past Marybeth with a glare. I wasn’t sure if it was directed at Marybeth, Evelyn, or me, but it was quickly replaced with a plastic smile aimed at the woman who approached her, saying, “It’s so good to see you out and about again.” I supposed I could forgive Ashley a glare, given her circumstances. It must have been hard for her to face the world when the whole town knew her family’s sordid business.

“Bless her heart,” Evelyn muttered. “I still can’t believe that husband of hers.”

“What did you think of the meeting?” I asked her.

“Wes is getting much better at public speaking. He used to be so shy.” That struck me as a way of looking for a way to say something nice.

“So it’s just going to make people more paranoid, but not necessarily more cautious,” I said, hazarding a guess.

“I didn’t say that,” she said primly, but with a twitch of her lips. She stood. “It was nice to see you again, Lexie.”

When almost everyone was gone, I made my way to the front of the room and approached Wes. “Do you have any comment about the meeting?” I asked him.

“Officially? For the newspaper?”

“Yeah.”

“I was glad to see such high turnout, which is a sure sign of civic involvement.”

I wrote that down. “Now, how do you really feel? Not for publication.”

“I think it went pretty well.” He frowned. “It did go well, didn’t it?”

“Yeah. No one came to blows, and you gave them some things to think about.”

“I hope they think, especially about the gun issue. I live in dread of having to deal with someone shooting their neighbor.”

“You know, I bet the thief was here tonight.”

His head snapped around like he'd heard a gunshot. "Why do you say that?"

"They're probably enjoying the power they have over their neighbors right now. They wouldn't be able to resist seeing how they're affecting people, and they'd want to hear what advice you gave. Now they'll know to look in drawers or in the backs of closets for any jewelry."

"Or I'm going to get a call about missing jewelry tomorrow because, instead of being at the meeting, the thief was taking advantage of everyone being here and was breaking in. I increased neighborhood patrols tonight for that reason."

"Or maybe the thief had a partner, and while one was here, the other was out breaking in."

"You have a criminal mind, Lexie Lincoln."

"I've interviewed a lot of criminals over the years. It seems you've decided that this crime wave isn't over, after all. Returning the jewelry didn't mean they were done."

He didn't meet my eyes when he said, "Better to plan for the worst and be pleasantly surprised. I'm worried that if it just stops now and we never catch the thief, the town will tear itself apart with suspicion."

On that unsettling note, I headed up the aisle. I hadn't quite made it to the door before Wes's radio crackled. I stopped so I could eavesdrop. I was pretty sure I heard the words, "Signs of break-in," come over the radio.

Chapter Seven

I turned to look at Wes, who warned, “Don’t say a word,” as he jogged past me up the aisle toward the door.

“I didn’t say anything!” I stuck with him, and he didn’t stop me. When we made it outside, he didn’t get into his vehicle, but instead ran across the street. One of the other officers waited there with the homeowners, a tall, thin elderly man and his wife, who was either younger or had a good hairstylist.

“What happened?” Wes asked as he approached.

“We came home from the meeting, and the glass in the kitchen door was broken,” the homeowner said. “We didn’t go inside.”

As far as I knew, this was the first property damage associated with the thefts. Broken glass was an escalation. If this was part of the same string of crimes, it meant the thieves didn’t have what they needed, and they were growing increasingly desperate to get it.

“Stay here,” Wes ordered me. He gestured for the other officer to stay at the front door and went around to the backyard, his flashlight lit. A minute or so later, lights came on in the house. A few minutes after that, Wes came around to the front. “No one’s inside,” he told the homeowners. “You’ll have to tell me if anything’s missing.”

He took the homeowners inside, and I waited impatiently. I wished I could go with them, but there was no good reason for me to be there, and the homeowners hadn’t invited me. When Wes

came out again, he said, "You're still here?"

"I was curious," I said with a shrug. "What was taken?"

"What do you think?"

"Jewelry, right? So, someone was breaking in during the meeting."

"Across the street from the meeting, which was pretty bold. Right under our noses."

"Taking it personally, Lieutenant?"

"Hell yeah. I just don't get it. These crimes make no sense. Maybe we're dealing with some kind of kleptomaniac, stealing for the sake of stealing."

"That's an interesting theory."

"And you're going to write about this, of course."

"Hey, maybe by the time the paper goes to press, you'll have solved this, and I'll write that story instead. Wrap things up by Thursday morning so I'll have time to write."

"Go home, Lexie. These people won't want to talk to you tonight."

"Of course not. They've got enough to worry about. What kind of ghoul do you think I am?"

His face immediately softened. "I'm sorry. Maybe I phrased that badly."

I felt bad enough about how bad he seemed to feel that I relented. "From what I've heard about my predecessor, it's perfectly reasonable for you to jump to that kind of conclusion about the local newspaper editor. For future reference, though, I'm not like that." Still, I made a note of the address and the name "Morton" on the mailbox so I could talk to the victims the next day—or, I hoped, talk to any ghost who might hang around their house.

The next morning, after I'd written my article on the crime watch meeting, I found the theft victims in the directory and called them. "Hi, this is Lexie Lincoln with the *Gazette*," I said when Mr. Morton answered. "I was wondering if you'd be willing to talk to

me about the break-in. I think it's important to make the whole community aware of what's going on. I can come by whenever it's convenient for you."

I've found that in circumstances like these, people either hang up on me or otherwise refuse to talk, or they're overly eager to be heard. Fortunately, Mr. Morton seemed to be the latter. "Of course, whatever we can do, and maybe we can get our things back, like the other people did," he said. We set an appointment for the afternoon. When I arrived, the Mortons welcomed me inside, where they had a nice afternoon tea set out on the coffee table in the living room.

At my last job, we'd had strict rules about refusing offers of refreshments to avoid even the appearance of a conflict of interest. In this town, that policy would have made me look rude. I'd have to draw the line at anything that looked like it really might be a bribe, but I couldn't expect to enter someone's home without being fed, whether or not I was a reporter. After accepting a glass of iced tea and a couple of cookies and indulging in a little small talk about how I was enjoying the town so far, I opened my notebook and said, "Now, can you tell me how you noticed the break-in?"

Mr. Morton launched into the story about coming home from the meeting, going around to the kitchen door, and finding the window in that door broken. "It was very precise, right where they could reach through and unlock it, so I knew right away it wasn't just some kids throwing rocks. They always say not to go inside if you think someone might be in your house, so we came back to the front and called the police."

"Very wise," I said with a nod. "What did the thieves take?"

"It was like those other thefts, just some jewelry," Mrs. Morton said. In daylight, she looked closer to her husband's age, but in a very well-preserved way. I suspected her hair color wasn't entirely natural, but it wasn't obviously dyed. I got the impression from the photos on display in the room that she'd been one of the local beauties in her day. There were several pictures of a girl who

might have been her wearing evening gowns, tiaras, and beauty pageant sashes. “But in my case, it was a mix of real jewels and costume jewelry I inherited from my grandmother. The real pieces weren’t incredibly valuable, but they were expensive enough that Lieutenant Mosby thinks they might elevate the crime to a felony.”

That was interesting. If the thieves weren’t doing this for profit, they’d just made a big mistake. Perhaps rather than deliberately carrying out a crime right under the noses of the police, they’d merely taken advantage of the situation but had been hasty from fear of being so close to the cops and had taken more than they meant to. “Can you describe the more sentimental pieces that were taken?” I asked.

“Well, there were the pearls James gave me for our first anniversary,” she said with a fond smile at her husband. “And the gold necklace he gave me for our fiftieth.”

I was sure those were the ones that meant the most to her, but they were far less relevant to the case. “Any family heirlooms?”

“As I said, I inherited a lot of the pieces from my grandmother. They weren’t anything special, other than being lovely examples of Art Nouveau design, I suppose. And there were some brooches from my husband’s great-grandmother.”

“Hmmpf. Finally you mention the important things,” a voice said. I made a show of looking at my notebook so I could glance in the direction of the voice out of the corner of my eye. A tall woman in a high-necked long dress sat in the rocking chair in the corner by the fireplace. Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun, which made her look severe, but I suspected this woman would look severe even with her hair loose and flowing. The bun would be implied.

I tried to guess the Mortons’ ages and did some mental math to figure out how long ago Mr. Morton’s great-grandmother would have lived. I assumed this ghost was that great-grandmother, since she’d spoken up when they talked about her jewelry. If the Mortons had celebrated a fiftieth wedding anniversary, they were

probably in their seventies, and that likely put his great-grandmother in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, too far back for her to know anything about the sideshow. She didn't look like the sort of person who'd have approved of that sort of thing. I doubted it would do me much good to interrogate this ghost.

I coaxed Mrs. Morton into giving me a more detailed description of the missing pieces. She never said anything about her grandmother's involvement with the sideshow, but the thefts had been so targeted up to this point that I was sure she had to have been. If her husband's family was anything like the ghost glaring at us from the corner, I could see why she might not want to talk much about that aspect of her background. All the pieces had crystals or rhinestones in them, so it was hard for me to tell which one might have been the critical piece.

"Losing my brooches is probably for the best," the ghost muttered. "Better than having that hussy wear them." I didn't get the impression that the ghost was talking to me. She just seemed to be making her opinion known in general. I wondered if the residents of this home were affected in any way. They might not be able to hear her, but did they feel the displeasure or the negative energy?

Realizing that I wasn't going to get any supernatural help from this house, I wrapped up the interview, thanked the Mortons, and took my leave.

Although I had enough information to show a clear pattern, I still had no idea what the pattern meant. The thieves were taking jewelry once owned by sideshow members, and the ghost at the first house had said it was more valuable than anyone realized. No one else I'd talked to seemed to have any idea that the costume jewelry might be worth notice, or surely someone would have said something at the meeting.

The only person, living or dead, who seemed to know anything was the ghost in Marybeth's house. I needed to talk to her again,

but without Marybeth present so I could speak freely and ask the right questions. That would be difficult to do with everyone in the neighborhood so paranoid. Sneaking around to try to get close enough to the house to reach a ghost that was tied to it might get me shot. At the very least, I'd get reported to the police as a prowler.

I was still pondering this when I got back to the office. "What's got you looking so glum, chum?" Jean asked.

"This jewelry stuff. These are such petty crimes, but I'm afraid they could tear the town apart with suspicion. It's no longer just about stopping the thefts. It's about keeping the peace, and I'm no further along than I was to begin with. The only ghost at the latest crime scene didn't have anything to do with the sideshow. I hate it when I can't track down sources for a story. You're sure you don't know anything?"

"Honest, I've got nothing."

My phone buzzed, and I got it out of my purse to find a text from Margarita.

Jean leaned over my shoulder. "What's that?"

"A text message." It was easy to forget that she'd been dead for nearly forty years and hadn't left the newspaper building since then. "It's like telegrams, only you carry around the device for sending and receiving them, and they aren't in code."

"Really? Western Union in your pocket? What'll they think of next? Show me how it works." I showed her my text chain with Margarita. She peered at the screen. "Huh. Why not just talk? The phone was a big improvement over telegrams."

"Sometimes you can't talk out loud. And the person doesn't have to drop everything to have a conversation with you. They can respond when they get a chance. Plus, you've got whatever was said in writing, which sometimes comes in handy in our line of work. You've got something to refer to. I have people text me the details of events, for instance."

"That is handy. They jot it down for you and send it instead of

you having to find a pencil. I guess I missed out on that by dying too soon. Anyway, as I was saying before your text interrupted me, you need to do a better job of cultivating local sources for times like these.”

“I’ve been here a month,” I argued.

“Then see what you can get out of the person you know knows something.”

“I know,” I snapped. “I’d figured out that much.” I could go back to Marybeth’s to do a follow-up story, and maybe the ghost would talk to me again. I just needed a way to get Marybeth out of the room for a moment. Or find an excuse to step out of the room while still staying in the house. “But interviewing a ghost is complicated.”

Just then, someone entered the office, catching me arguing with thin air. Fortunately, I was still holding my phone, so I said, “I’ve got to go. Bye,” and pretended to end the call before smiling at the new arrival and saying, “How can I help you?”

Fortunately, all the visitor was doing was dropping off an item for the community calendar because I was sidetracked by an inspiration. A phone call was exactly what I needed. If I got a call I had to take while at the house, I’d have an excuse to step away, and then I could pretend to be on the phone while talking to the ghost without looking like I was talking to myself.

Brilliant! Now I just needed to get someone to call me at the right time. But who? Wes was right out. He’d want to know why I needed an escape route, and I couldn’t tell him why I was talking to a past victim. I looked out the window across the street to where Ruthie sat in her studio window, painting. She’d be willing to help, I was sure, but I knew she tended to get lost in her painting, so it would be an imposition to ask her to interrupt her work to be on my schedule. I figured Margarita would be my best bet. She worked in the evenings, so she might be free to help me during the day.

I called her, and I must have sounded tired or frustrated

because as soon as she heard my voice she said, “Rough day?”

“Not really, just the ongoing jewelry thefts. I had to interview more victims today.”

“That one is truly weird. I don’t get it. Why would anyone take that stuff and then return it?”

“I’m going back and interviewing some of the earlier victims to see if I can find a pattern. At the very least, I might get a good human interest story about the heirlooms of the sideshow. The trick is escaping from some of those places. Once they get started talking, I practically have to fake my own death to get away.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. But don’t do it. They’ll just keep yammering at you while they wait for the coroner to come retrieve your body.”

“I hope you’re not speaking from personal experience.”

“It’s a reasonable extrapolation. My grandmother has her own coping mechanism. She starts spouting prophecies, and most people then hustle her to the door.”

“I doubt that’ll work for me. I think what I need to do is set up someone to call me when I send a signal, and that gives me an excuse to leave.”

“I could do that,” she said. “I’m also available for getting away from bad dates.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, and I’d be happy to return the favor if you ever need it.” We discussed how it would work, and I was set. Next, I scheduled a follow-up interview with Marybeth, ostensibly about the return of her missing jewelry box.

The next morning, I set up some alerts on my phone at varying intervals and composed the prearranged text to Margarita before I headed over to Marybeth’s house. She greeted me at the front door, her little dog standing quietly at her side. I couldn’t remember ever seeing a dog that didn’t so much as bark when someone came to the door. It was eerie.

She saw me in and we sat in her living room. Her dog jumped into her lap so gracefully that it could have been leaping through a

hoop in a circus. "Your dog is so well behaved," I said. "You must be a really good trainer."

"It runs in the family," she said with a shrug. "My family did animal acts in the sideshow. I learned from my parents and grandparents how to work with animals, so training is second nature to me. It's all about communication, really. You need to learn to speak their language so they can understand what you expect of them."

My phone made a soft beep, and I made a show of giving it a quick glance. "Sorry about that," I said. "I have to stay on top of things."

"Oh, I can imagine."

"I called you because I thought it would be interesting to follow up on the theft cases."

"I did get all of my stolen things back, though a couple of pieces were missing stones," she said.

"Can you think of any reason why those stones might have been taken?"

She shook her head. "No idea. The crystal was a little loose on one of the brooches, so maybe it fell out in all the excitement. Otherwise, I don't know why those were taken when the others weren't. Maybe the thief thought they were really diamonds. They might have been of a higher quality than the others."

There was no sign of the ghost yet. I hoped the discussion of the lost jewelry would summon her. "There's no chance that one of the stones really was a diamond, is there?"

She laughed, and her dog yipped along with her. "I don't think my great-grandmother would have stayed here if she'd had a real diamond. Even a small one surely would have bought a train ticket out of here."

"This is going to sound like a funny question, but did you ever hear anything about a pact among the sideshow people?"

"There were a lot of them. They swore brotherhood, to stick together, to stand up for each other. That was part of carnival

culture. Why?"

"I noticed a photo in the sideshow museum of a group of women from the sideshow from probably back in the twenties. I recognized a number of the missing and returned jewelry pieces in the photo, including your peacock brooch. Someone had written 'The day of the Pact' on the bottom. With those pieces of jewelry being part of the case, I was curious what that meant. It was like someone was stealing the pieces from that picture."

She frowned and shook her head. "I'm sorry, I don't know anything about it. My grandparents didn't talk much about the show, other than teaching me about animals. They only had a couple of stories about life in the show before they settled here."

"That's because there wasn't much to tell," said a breathy voice. Finally, the ghost had shown up. Marybeth didn't seem to notice anything, but her dog turned to face that corner of the room.

"I guess the case of the stolen jewelry will remain a big mystery," I said, aiming my words as much at the ghost as at Marybeth.

"They want them all," the ghost intoned.

That got my attention, but I fought to hide my reaction. With perfect timing, one of my alerts went off. I glanced at my phone, sent my pre-written text to Margarita as though I was responding to a message that had just come through, and put my phone down again, trying to focus my attention on Marybeth, even as I waited for a call and tried to keep an eye on the ghost.

"I hear there was another break-in," Marybeth said.

"Yes, and it happened during the crime watch meeting, if you can believe it."

She shook her head sadly. "The nerve. If they ever catch this person, I'd like to have words with them."

My phone rang, and I glanced at it. "I'm sorry, I need to take this. Can you excuse me for a moment?"

"Of course."

I got up and headed for the front porch, giving the ghost a

meaningful look as I passed. Outside, I answered and told Margarita, "Thanks."

"No problem. Enjoy your freedom."

I ended the call but kept the phone against my face as though I was talking to cover the conversation with the ghost, if she deigned to join me.

I sat on the porch swing and soon found I wasn't alone. The ghost's figure looked even hazier outside in daylight once it passed through the wall from the house to the porch.

"You must stop them from getting all the crystals," the ghost said. "Or we're doomed."

Chapter Eight

I shivered in spite of the morning sun that flooded the porch.

“Doomed” was a few steps beyond anything I’d anticipated.

“The crystals?” I said. “Do you mean the stones in the jewelry? What is it about the crystals that they want?”

“My mother never said, only that they had to be kept apart. And then my silly daughter had to go and marry the son of another sideshow person who had his own crystal. Two together!”

“The crystals together do something bad?”

I got the impression that the ghost was talking more to herself than to me. “The power is weaker apart, stronger together. They must be stopped.” She rose abruptly and walked through the wall into the house. I reached out as though to grab her and hold her back, even though that was pointless. Not only was she already gone, but it’s impossible to hold a ghost.

Still pretending to have a phone conversation, I leaned back in the swing and pushed off against the porch with my foot. That was as close as I dared come to jumping up and down in frustration. I knew just enough to get a sense of why the jewelry was valuable and to know that there might be danger, but not enough to do anything about it. I didn’t know what the crystals did, why they were dangerous, or who might be stealing them. I wondered what the critical mass for danger was, since the thieves already had a lot of them.

With a sigh, I mimed ending the call and returned to Marybeth.

“Sorry about that. I’m going to hire a receptionist eventually, but for the time being, all the newspaper calls have to come to me.”

I chatted with her a little more about what she remembered of her grandmother and where her family had come from before joining the sideshow. I asked a few more questions about the jewelry, hoping that would make the ghost reappear, but the ghost was well and truly gone for now. When I felt like I’d been there long enough to justify my visit, I thanked Marybeth and left.

I didn’t have much time to worry about the curious crystals after I got back to the office because it was crunch time for finishing up the next issue of the newspaper. I spent the rest of the afternoon and the next morning writing last-minute articles, editing copy submitted by the community, and planning where each article should go, all with plenty of input from Jean. I noticed a few more thefts in the next police blotter, and I couldn’t help but wonder how many more there might be that didn’t make it into the official record. Or had Wes given up trying to hide the statistics, since everyone tended to call me, too?

Friday morning, I had a meeting with the newspaper board. Evelyn arrived early, followed by Lupe and Patricia. We gathered around my desk, and Jean joined us. I was fairly certain the board knew about Jean. I just didn’t know how well they could see or hear her.

“So, Lexie, now that you’ve been here a month, we thought it was time to discuss operations in more detail,” Evelyn said once we’d all taken seats. “How are you settling in?”

“Okay, I think,” I said.

“You’re not having any trouble with the management structure?”

“You mean Jean?”

They all exchanged glances, and their relief was so strong that the air in the room seemed lighter. “So, you have seen her,” Lupe said.

“She’s here now,” I said.

"You bet I am," Jean said. "They can't have a board meeting without me."

"That was the part of the job Paul Ogden was unprepared for," Patricia said. "It doesn't bother you?"

"I'll admit, it takes a little getting used to," I said, "but since I'm learning the job, I'm glad to get some coaching from someone with so much experience."

Jean's eyes went wide as she smiled in surprise. "Well, kiddo, that's nice to hear. Maybe we should have hired someone younger the last time." I couldn't help but grin in response.

"What did she say?" Evelyn asked.

"That maybe you should have hired someone young the last time," I said. "An experienced editor might have been taken aback by finding out that he wasn't really in charge."

"Even without Jean being present, her wishes would still provide administrative structure," Evelyn said. "The newspaper is funded by an endowment she established, and she left strict guidelines for how it should be managed."

"The newspaper was my baby, so I figured it might as well inherit my estate," Jean said.

"We still try to make the paper profitable, if at all possible," Evelyn continued. "We keep expenses as low as we can, and we try to push ad sales and subscriptions. The endowment ensures that we can always pay salaries and make any necessary capital expenditures, but the more profitable we are, the longer that endowment can last. At the moment, you're the only full-time employee, with everyone else being part-time or freelance. Do you need any additional staff, perhaps another reporter or an assistant editor?"

"If anything, I could use a receptionist, possibly someone who's also capable of doing some writing," I said after thinking for a moment. "I need someone to hold down the fort while I'm out on an assignment—take phone calls, deal with people who stop by, that sort of thing. And while they're waiting for the phone to ring,

they could do things like the wedding announcements, obituaries, community calendar, police blotter, and so forth. Maybe do a little reporting.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Evelyn said.

“A girl Friday is just what you need,” Jean agreed.

“There’s just one problem,” I said with a glance at Jean. “It could get weird to have someone here in the office if I’m talking to Jean. They’d think I’m talking to myself all day. Ideally, we need to find someone who can also interact with ghosts. And I’d prefer we hire someone local because that would balance me. They’d be dealing with the public, and that would go easier for someone who knows them. The kind of writing they’d do would depend a lot on local knowledge. But is that too high a bar to set?”

“In this town?” Patricia said with a grin. “We’re bound to find someone else who can see ghosts. We’ll look into it and see what we can find.”

Since the topic of ghosts was out in the open, I took a deep breath and said, “Speaking of talking to ghosts, I heard something from one while I was interviewing someone about the thefts that I haven’t been able to verify further, and I was wondering if any of you might know anything. The ghost said that it would be terrible for the town if someone was collecting crystals, and it did turn out that crystals were taken from all the pieces of jewelry that were returned. There was something about how they have more power together. Does that mean anything to you?”

“I recall an old story,” Lupe said. “It was the sort of thing the older people talked about when they thought no one else was around, but the moment they realized anyone was listening, they’d clam up. There was something they thought might be dangerous that they’d neutralized, maybe by splitting it up. I’m not sure because I only ever heard bits and pieces of the discussion.”

“I do recall seeing crystals in a lot of the jewelry that older people wore,” Patricia said. “I have a piece or two from my mother. But all the jewelry then was like that. I never knew it

might be connected.”

“Could they all have been pieces from the same, larger crystal, broken up and distributed among the troupe?” I asked.

“The question is, why?” Lupe said. “My grandmother had a crystal ball she used for fortune-telling, but I think that’s different.”

I wasn’t sure which of the sideshow talents were real and which were carnival hokum. Could the fortune-teller actually see something in that crystal ball? I hesitated to ask. Inadvertently insulting the people who paid your salary was never a good idea, and some of the sideshow people were sensitive about their background.

“There’s a photo in the museum of women from the sideshow, and it has something written on it about ‘The Pact.’ I think your grandmother was in it, Lupe,” I said.

“That’s probably what they were talking about, but I don’t know more than that. You visited the museum? What did you think?”

“It was interesting, but I don’t think it’s being shown to its best advantage right now.”

“It could definitely stand to be spiffed up,” Lupe agreed.

“We probably need to do some fundraising for the museum,” Evelyn said.

“Or suggest to Jordan that restoring it would create a tourist magnet,” Patricia said dryly. “Right now, it’s a blight on his pretty downtown.”

“I did see a couple of tourists heading there the other day,” I said.

We spent the rest of the meeting going over procedures for expenditures, the list of freelancers I could call upon, and some ideas for updating the newspaper’s website so we could post breaking news between issues. The few issues I’d edited had turned a small profit and there hadn’t been any decrease in circulation numbers. In fact, circulation had gone up slightly since I took over, though that might just have been the number of copies I’d bought

to add to my portfolio and send to my family. It was cool having my name on a masthead as editor, and it had somewhat mollified my parents, who were worried that I was sidetracking my career by moving to a smaller paper.

When the board left, Jean lingered. "I'm worried," she said.

"About what?"

"If they don't know about the crystals, that means it's a deep, dark secret. Emphasis on the 'dark.' It's gotta be bad if the sideshow folks weren't willing to tell anyone. Not only did no one tell me—and I got pretty close to a lot of them—but they don't seem to have told their offspring."

"Someone has to know in order to be going after the crystals," I pointed out.

"Yeah, and they've got us at a disadvantage."

I THOUGHT about the case all weekend, without much progress. It might have been my imagination, but things seemed tense at the diner when I went out for a Saturday breakfast, with people very pointedly giving each other suspicious glares, and I was pretty sure the crowds at an event I covered on Sunday afternoon had split into factions. I felt like the town was fraying around me. If this case didn't get resolved soon, I feared the town would lose that lovely TV movie quality, and before I even got to experience my first festival here.

From what the ghost had said, it sounded like there had been some power in a crystal that was broken up and distributed among the troupe, hidden in pieces of jewelry. Had that been because the crystal itself was dangerous, or was it a way for the troupe to come together to protect each other, and it was dangerous if the power fell into the wrong hands? Was it a way of channeling and combining their talents?

No, I thought. Then it wouldn't do one person any good to

collect all the pieces. It was more likely that there was something that could be done with the whole crystal that couldn't be done with the pieces scattered. Unfortunately, the knowledge had been lost a generation or so later. Nobody alive now seemed to know anything, and even the ghosts I'd spoken to were all too young to know the story. I needed to go a generation back, to the people who were adults—possibly even elderly—when the sideshow came to town.

But those people hadn't had any real ties to the town, so would they have stuck around as ghosts? Jean said someone had to have a reason to cling to a place instead of moving on, and the longer it had been since someone's death, the more tenuous their ties to this plane. Jean stuck around out of sheer willpower. She'd made a conscious effort to link herself to the newspaper. She was the most coherent ghost I'd met. Then there was Estelle, the librarian, who was also still tied to a place that had been everything to her in life. Even half a century after her death, she was still providing reference pointers and book recommendations to those who could hear her.

Would someone who'd come to town late in life and had no ties here haunt a house they hadn't lived in long? I hadn't found any sideshow ghosts at the train cars now serving as the diner and the museum.

Where else could I look?

I was still pondering that Monday morning while I read the e-mail that had come in over the weekend. I opened a message from the funeral home about recent deaths and upcoming funerals and had a burst of inspiration. The cemetery! If a restless spirit without strong ties to the town were going to haunt a place, it might be where its body was. At least, I guessed so. I didn't actually know that much about how ghosts worked. But I did know someone who had firsthand experience with that.

When Jean showed up to check on my progress, I asked her, "Were the people who came with the sideshow buried in any

particular cemetery? I mean the original people, not descendants.”

“There’s just one cemetery in town. Back in that day, there were different sections for Protestants and Catholics and for different races, but it was still just the one. It’s out on the edge of town, past the park by the river.” She grinned. “Yeah, they put the park by the cemetery. Back in the old days, people would have picnics at the cemetery. The park was an extension of that. Why? You think you’ll find some ghosts there?”

“It’s worth a shot. The ones at the houses seem to be too young, and I figured that the older people who might know about the crystals and whatever pact they had might not have developed close ties to the houses. That leaves the old rail cars and their own bodies. I didn’t run into anyone at the museum, and the ghosts I might have seen at the diner look too recent.”

“People without strong ties to a place tend to move on, I should warn you.”

“Yeah, that’s what I suspect, but I’m running out of options.”

“Go at sunset. Those in-between times when it’s not quite day and not quite night seem to be easier for making the journey, so you’re more likely to see ghosts right after it gets dark. You know, I bet having one of those pieces of jewelry that still has a crystal would help draw someone that’s important to.”

“As paranoid as people are about that jewelry, I don’t think asking for a piece would go over well. They might even think I’m the one taking it and that I’m trying a new tactic to get my hands on it. And everyone I know who owns a piece of that jewelry has already had it stolen and the crystals removed. I don’t know who else might be out there.” Then it occurred to me. “Oh, wait, there’s Evelyn.”

I hadn’t contacted Evelyn before. It was usually the other way around. I found her number in the Rolodex on my desk and called, feeling odd about the request I was making. On the phone, I just told her I needed to talk to her about something, and she invited me to come over that afternoon.

She reminded me so much of Queen Elizabeth that I halfway expected to find her living in a palace or, at the very least, one of those white-pillared mansions in the historic district. Her home proved to be a simple white clapboard house with a wide front porch, though the garden in front was impressive enough for a palace. When she opened the door to me and I found myself facing her, I thought it might have been easier to discuss it over the phone. It was weird to talk about ghosts directly, but once she'd escorted me inside and offered me iced tea and cookies, I forced myself to plunge right in. "I thought I'd use my gift to see if there's anyone from an earlier time who might know about the crystals haunting the graveyard. Jean suggested I might have better luck if I took one of the crystals with me, and you're the only one I know who might have one of the relevant pieces that hasn't been stolen yet."

I wasn't sure how I expected her to react, but a pleased grin wasn't on my list of possibilities. "Oh good, you're getting into the spirit of things—no pun intended. That's an excellent idea. I should have thought of it sooner and offered it to you. My grandmother is buried in that cemetery. She came with the sideshow, and I know my brooch belonged to her because we have photographs of her wearing it. Just a moment, let me get it." She rose and added with a smile, "I hid it after Wes made that suggestion at the meeting."

She returned a few minutes later with a brooch shaped like a butterfly about the size of the palm of her hand. It had probably once been a golden color, but had faded and tarnished. The wings were colored gems, and the body was a row of clear crystals. "It's lovely," I said.

"It is, isn't it? Before all this started happening, I wouldn't have thought it was worth anything to anyone other than me. I like it because it's pretty and because it belonged to my grandmother, but if I took it to a jeweler, he'd probably laugh at me. It might be of interest to a collector who likes this particular kind of thing, but it was cheap and not worth much even back in the day." She handed

it to me. "Good luck. I hope it helps."

"I'll take good care of it," I promised. "And I'll return it as soon as I can."

"Maybe it'll be safer with you, as long as no one knows you have it. The thief won't expect a newcomer to have one of these pieces. My grandmother's name was Dorothy O'Hanlon. I have no idea if she would still be haunting the place. From what I remember of her, she'll have plenty to say if she is, but I don't know if it will be of any use to you."

On my way out, I couldn't resist pausing to look at the gallery of family photos in the entryway. I noticed two wedding photos of Evelyn, one in black and white of her as a young woman in a traditional bridal gown and one from probably about twenty years ago with her in a suit. That explained how she was Wes's father's mother but had a different last name. I couldn't help but notice the picture of a solemn-looking redheaded boy in the gallery. Seeing my attention, she said, "Yes, that's Wes."

"So, he was always fairly serious. Let me guess, he was a crossing guard and hall monitor."

She laughed. "You already know him pretty well. But he's not as stern as he seems. He merely takes his responsibilities seriously. He got the red hair from my grandmother, though it doesn't show in this picture." She pointed to a faded sepia portrait of an older couple. I recognized the woman from the pact picture, and she was even wearing the same outfit, possibly her one good dress, with the brooch I now held pinned just below her shoulder. She looked formidable. I wasn't sure I'd want to encounter that woman alive and in broad daylight. Meeting her ghost at night would be terrifying. As though reading my thoughts, Evelyn gave me a reassuring pat on the arm. "Now, good luck tonight, and let me know what you learn. And give my grandmother my love."

Chapter Nine

Fortunately, sunset was still relatively early at this time of year, so I could interview the ghosts and get home instead of staying up half the night. I prepared carefully for my spectral stakeout, making a pot of tea to put in a thermos and putting together a selection of snacks. I checked the batteries in my flashlight and packed some spares. I wondered if maybe I should bring some candles for the proper atmosphere, but I'd never needed them to talk to ghosts before. I also brought a plastic mat so I wouldn't have to sit on the ground. Finally, I had done everything I possibly could to get ready and couldn't put it off any longer, so I forced myself to get in my car and go.

I'd always hated cemeteries. They terrified me. I'd only stopped closing my eyes when I passed one when I started driving and that became dangerous. If I was the passenger, I still looked away. Now that I knew I could see ghosts, the phobia seemed a lot less irrational. It made sense for me to dislike cemeteries if I actually saw the ghosts lingering there. I hadn't always known that's what I was seeing. I'd thought it was my overactive imagination putting faces in the mists that swirled around graveyards, especially at night. I didn't realize that most people didn't see those mists, let alone the faces. Knowing that they really were ghosts didn't make those figures any less frightening. I didn't know if they could do anything to harm me, but looking at them was bad enough.

I found the cemetery past the park, as Jean had said. It was still

technically within city limits, but was far beyond the part of town that looked at all like a town. The paved road ended just before the gates, and there was a gravel road around the edge of the cemetery. Fortunately, the gates were open, so I wouldn't have to climb the fence. I drove to a spot where I could turn the car around. In case I needed out of there, I wanted to be able to drive out quickly. I hoped any ghosts in the cemetery were as tethered to their location as the other ghosts I'd encountered. That would make it easy to escape anything unpleasant I stirred up.

The cemetery itself wasn't too horrifying. It looked like an extension of the park, aside from the rows of stones. It had been well maintained, with the grass mowed and the stones cleared of moss. There were a few trees scattered throughout and along the fences, and they had leafed out, so they looked welcoming rather than skeletal. A fresh mound of dirt marked a new grave near the front gate, and I sincerely hoped that person had either moved on or had somewhere better to haunt. I knew I must have edited that person's obituary, but I couldn't recall who it was.

Clouds were gathering in the western sky, creating a spectacular sunset now, but I worried it might mean rain. It also meant that twilight was a little dimmer than I'd expected. I wondered if that would affect the ghosts' timing. I just about had to peel my fingers off the steering wheel to make myself get moving. I had a job to do, I reminded myself. Not officially, since this would never go in the newspaper, but if Marybeth's ghost was right that there was a danger to the town, I was obligated to do whatever I could to look into it.

I gathered my supplies, pinned on the brooch, and got out of the car to head out among the graves. I should have thought to ask Evelyn exactly where her grandmother was buried, but the cemetery wasn't that large. I suspected that someone named O'Hanlon would be buried in the Catholic section, unless she'd converted. There was a fenced-off area in the back corner, so I headed over there. I found a lot of Czech names on older stones

there, but no O'Hanlon. That meant she must be in the general area. The oldest-looking stones were truly old for this part of the world, dating to the 1800s. I moved farther forward. She'd have to be in the area with graves from the 1930s or later for her to be buried here, but the graves weren't organized strictly by date. They were in family groups. She didn't have earlier family in town, though.

I finally found a gravestone for Dorothy O'Hanlon. It was a single stone but mentioned that she was the wife of Daniel, so I assumed he was buried elsewhere. I laid out my mat and sat down next to Dorothy's grave, feeling silly and self-conscious.

The sun dipped below the horizon to the west, leaving the world in twilight with just a faint pink tinge to some of the clouds. "So, anyone want to chat about the crystals?" I said out loud. If anyone heard me, they didn't respond. Was there something I should do or say to summon ghosts? In my experience, they tended to show up whether or not I wanted them. I could generally get Jean by saying her name—or by suggesting I put the wrong thing on the front page. What if Dorothy had long since moved on, rejoining her husband and children? Would anyone else come out to talk to me?

I poured a cup of tea and took a cookie out of the packet I'd brought. If I didn't think about where I was or why I was there, this wasn't entirely unpleasant. It was a nice evening. I ought to drink tea outside more often. How long had it been since I'd had a picnic? The one drawback to the apartment over the newspaper office was that there was no outdoor living space, no patio or balcony. I supposed I could set up a chair on the landing outside the rear entrance, but the alley wasn't very scenic. And now I was mentally dithering about nonsense to distract myself.

As the daylight faded, it became less pleasant. It was just light enough for me to be able to tell I was in a cemetery, surrounded by graves, and the sky had turned a dark blue, streaked with purple where the clouds were. I saw motion ahead of me and braced

myself, but it didn't look like a ghost. It looked like a mourner at the fresh grave. He wore modern clothes and stood by the grave, staring at it like he was trying to make sense of it all. My heart went out to him. His loss must have been as fresh as the dirt mounded on the grave.

Then I realized that I hadn't seen him arrive. The only car in the graveyard was mine, and this cemetery wasn't within walking distance of anywhere. I hadn't heard a car. I stayed perfectly still, watching him as he became less and less solid, then turned into mist and disappeared. I shivered, suddenly chilled, and poured more tea to warm up the cup.

The sun had now gone down entirely. There were no lights in the cemetery, just a single lamp on a pole at the gate, pointed at the road, and I was far enough from the town that there wasn't a lot of ambient light. The moon didn't provide much help. It was really dark—can't see your hand in front of your face dark. It had been a long time since I'd experienced anything like this. Between street lights, building lights, lighted signs, and security lights, my world was seldom dark. The closest I'd come to experiencing darkness this intense was once after a bad storm when power was out throughout the city and I'd had to go out to report on the damage. Even then, there had been car headlights. Here, there wasn't a glimmer of light. I could have turned on my flashlight, but that would have only made the darkness around me seem even darker by contrast.

I didn't know how long I sat out there, grumbling to myself about ghosts apparently not knowing they were supposed to appear at twilight, before the mist rose. It could have been fog rolling in from the nearby river or a mist rising from the damp ground. It had been a fairly wet spring and the ground was still moist. But this mist looked a lot like what I saw whenever I was near a cemetery. There wasn't much of a breeze, and yet the mist swirled around me. I thought I could make out hints of faces—dark holes in the mist that might have been eyes, slashes below them

that looked like mouths. The mouths opened, and a soft, low moan echoed through the graveyard. A gust of wind fluttered my hair. Did that mean the ghosts could affect me physically? That wasn't a reassuring thought.

"That's *mine!*" a voice said as the wind tugged at my jacket where the brooch was pinned.

Every instinct I had told me to run. That fight-or-flight thing was real, and the "flight" urge was powerful. I forced myself to resist it. This was what I wanted to happen. A ghost appearing was a good thing. This was all going according to plan.

Besides, even if I'd wanted to run, I wasn't sure I could have made myself move, and my legs might not have supported me. I was frozen to the ground, feeling weak and shaky. I was getting used to talking to ghosts, but most of them didn't seem like ghosts. They weren't anything like what's shown in horror movies and haunted houses. They were just people, only more vague and transparent. This, though, was a ghost right out of a Halloween display. There wasn't much humanity left to it, only a voice and a vague sense of existence. And anger. Lots of anger.

"Yes, it's your brooch," I said, my voice trembling. "Your granddaughter lent it to me because she thought you might be able to help me. What about it is so special?"

Being addressed somewhat calmly—at least, without shrieks of terror—seemed to take the ghost aback. She quit whirling around and stirring up the air, and she coalesced into a more defined form in front of me. I still wouldn't have recognized her from the picture in Evelyn's hallway, but I could tell she'd once been human. "The crystals!" she boomed.

Other ghosts around us echoed, "The crystals!"

"But what about the crystals? What makes them valuable?"

"We do not speak of it."

"We do not speak of it," the other ghosts repeated, their voices sounding like a howling wind.

I groaned, my momentary terror turning quickly to irritation.

Were all ghosts utterly infuriating? “I know, you made a pact. First rule of crystal club is that you don’t talk about crystal club. But someone out there found out about it, and they’re gathering the crystals. If you want me to stop them, someone’s going to have to tell me more than just that the crystals are dangerous and powerful.” I pointed to the brooch I wore. “See, I’m wearing it, so consider me in on the pact.”

The ghost dissolved into mist and joined the others. The eerie moaning grew louder. I got the sense of an argument, though I couldn’t make out words. Wind whipped my hair. This was a scene right out of my nightmares, and I suspected it would provide fuel for even more nightmares. The fact that it was real and not just in my head only made it worse.

I thought I might have lost the ghost, but she formed again in front of me. “The crystal had great power, so it had to be divided.”

“Great power,” the ghosts echoed. Apparently, they’d decided to help me.

“But what power? Why would someone try to gather all the crystals? What would they do with them?”

“No one person must be allowed to have all the crystals.”

“What power?” I repeated. I felt like I was talking in circles. I knew the crystal had been divided and that it was dangerous. But why?

“All power. It makes any gift stronger.”

“Oh,” I said, realization dawning. That made some sense. Some of the sideshow talents could be dangerous if they were amplified too much. The strong man was already practically a Hulk. He could probably throw people through walls if he had something to make him even stronger. Then there was the electro man, who could wipe out a city’s electrical grid if he got a power surge. This was like something out of a supervillain’s origin story.

“The crystal must remain divided!” the ghosts said.

“Who did you take it from in the first place?” I asked, but as I spoke, twin bright lights raked the cemetery and the ghosts

vanished. With the wind and the moaning gone, I could hear the car engine as someone drove through the open gate. I wanted to scream. I might not have learned anything more from the ghosts, but now I didn't stand a chance. "Oh, forgot to tell you, your granddaughter Evelyn sends her love," I said softly.

Now I had to worry about who'd just arrived. A security guard? I hadn't seen any posted hours, and the gates had been open when I arrived, so I didn't think I was trespassing. I hadn't committed any vandalism. The new arrival drove up the opposite side of the cemetery from where my car was parked and came to a stop. The engine died and the headlights went out as the interior dome light came on. I didn't have a good vantage point to see the person inside the car, but I didn't think they were wearing a uniform.

A car door opened and closed, and the car's interior light went out. A flashlight began bobbing across the cemetery. Who would be in the cemetery at night? Well, other than me. I had a legitimate reason to be here. Was someone else here for the same reason, or was I about to bust a graveyard vandal? There weren't a lot of places for kids to hang out in this town. I wouldn't be surprised to find that the cemetery was party central, even on a Monday night.

I sat perfectly still, hoping that the newcomer wouldn't see me in the darkness outside the flashlight's beam and hoping they didn't come toward me. The light stayed to the other side of the cemetery, heading toward the fenced-off area on the other side of the graveyard, the part that had once been segregated. I got the impression that the visitor was a woman, solidly built but still feminine.

As she approached the fenced area, a score of ghosts rose to meet her. Some were as unformed as Dorothy's spirit had been. A few others were almost as clear and vivid as Jean. They surrounded the woman, looking oddly like a pack of friendly dogs eagerly greeting their owner. "Hold your horses," she scolded them. "I'm not that late. And y'all can talk amongst yourselves if I'm not here, so there's no point in getting excited about me

coming. It's not like you can even eat the biscuits. I just bring them for you to smell." She took something out of her bag, removed a lid, and set it on the ground.

I couldn't hear what the ghosts said, but the woman said, "I did use your recipe, Big Mama. I think the flour may be different now, though. Or maybe no one can make them like you did."

So, I wasn't the only person visiting the graveyard to talk to ghosts, but she was apparently having a family reunion, not interrogating the spirits. I smiled at the thought of visiting with long-dead family members. Growing up the way I had, moving around and living overseas, I hadn't been particularly close to my extended family. I wondered if there was a chance I could meet them now. Would they still be around, or had they moved on?

But for the moment, I had a problem. I didn't think I could make it back to my car in the utter darkness without turning on my flashlight, and it would be really obvious when I started my car, so there was no way I could sneak away. Showing myself might get awkward, since both of us would have to confess to the ghost thing, or else I'd have to make up another reason to be hanging out in a graveyard at night. Nothing plausible came to mind, given that I had no connections here. Was the nighttime picnic thing too weird? But if she discovered me later, then it would be even more awkward if she knew I'd been sitting around, listening to her without saying anything.

I packed my things, stood up, and turned on my flashlight. "Hello?" I called out. "Don't be alarmed, I'm leaving. I just didn't want to startle you."

She turned and pointed her flashlight at me. It wasn't too powerful, so it didn't blind me, but it did keep me from getting a good look at her. "Who's there?" she asked.

"My name's Lexie, and I was just here chatting with a ghost when you showed up. I'll leave you alone for your get-together."

"You talk to ghosts?" She sounded mildly skeptical, but since she was doing it, too, I guessed that it wasn't so much that she

didn't believe it was possible as it was she doubted my ability to do it.

"Yes, and it seems so do you. But I don't want to intrude on your family reunion, so I'll head out now." I bent to pick up the mat I'd been sitting on and stuffed it into my bag.

"You can see and hear the ghosts, and everything?"

"Yes. And it's not always convenient, let me tell you."

She laughed and lowered her flashlight. "Ain't that the truth?" She gestured over her shoulder toward the ghosts gathered behind her. "It's my great-grandad's birthday, so I came out for a visit, and the rest of the family's here, too. Were you visiting family?"

"More like doing an interview. There's some information that no one currently living seems to have and I was hoping to find it here."

She walked toward me. "My name's Charlene Robinson. It's nice to meet someone else with the gift. I don't think I've seen you around town before."

"I just moved here."

"You're not one of the sideshow people?"

"No. I just seem to have this gift."

"You and me both. I'm pure local, but in a town like this, I'm less of a freak than I would be elsewhere. Maybe that's why they fit in so well here. We already had a few oddities of our own. What brings you to Stirling Mills, other than ghosts?"

"I'm the new newspaper editor."

"Oh! Good to meet you. I like what you've done with it. I never much liked the other guy, may he rest in peace."

"You're a subscriber?"

"Oh, yes. I read it as soon as it comes out. I always wanted to be a reporter."

On impulse, I said, "I don't suppose you're looking for a job. I need an assistant, mostly to answer phones and do some clerical stuff, but maybe also to do a little writing. Being able to talk to ghosts would be really helpful."

“Miss Jean’s still hanging around, is she?” She didn’t sound at all surprised.

“She’s still running things, to be honest, so anyone I hire needs to be able to hear her. Which makes recruiting difficult. That sort of thing is really hard to put in a help-wanted ad, and I’m afraid of the kind of calls I’d get if I did.”

She chuckled. Her ghosts gathered around her, competing for her attention. “Why don’t we talk about that in daylight? My family’s getting impatient here.”

“Come by the newspaper office sometime. It was nice meeting you.”

“Likewise.”

I made my way to my car, forcing my attention back to the case at hand. Whoever was taking the crystals must have some power that would make an impact if it were amplified significantly. I didn’t have a good sense of what powers there might be. I’d run into a strong man and an electro girl, and I knew their powers were real. There was the fortune-teller, but I didn’t know if that was real. Amplifying that power might be useful, but I didn’t see how it might be a threat that would doom the town. Likewise with the acrobats. Extra agility might help someone make the cheerleading squad, but I couldn’t imagine it being a danger. The hypnotist might be able to make an army of minions, but did the Amazing Crenshaw actually have powers or was that just an act? My guess was that the thief was a descendant of someone who was part of the pact, and their ancestor had kept records that the perpetrator was using to track down the crystals. Whoever it was had to be pretty good at research to figure out who might currently hold the relevant pieces.

I supposed it was possible that the ghosts had only been alarmed about the power of the crystal because someone had used it for nefarious means in the past. That didn’t necessarily mean that the person stealing the crystals now had big plans. It could be something as simple as getting a date for the prom or making the

cheerleading squad. The thefts had started during spring break, as I recalled. Maybe Wes was right about the thief being a kid.

As I drove past the high school, thinking about cheerleading, spring break, and the prom made me glance in that direction. Flashing red and blue lights caught my eye, and I automatically turned in to the school's driveway to see what was going on. It was probably nothing more than a traffic stop, but there weren't a lot of opportunities for breaking news in this town, and I didn't want to risk missing one when I was in the right place at the right time.

Chapter Ten

Two police vehicles sat in front of the school, their lights flashing, while a group of officers surrounded a figure sitting hunched on the school's front steps. I stopped my car behind the last police vehicle and started to get out. At the last second, I remembered that I was wearing Wes's grandmother's brooch. I didn't want to have to explain that, so I removed it and put it in the center console container.

Wes saw me approaching and came over to meet me. "There's nothing going on here, Lex," he said. "Nothing worth putting in the newspaper."

"I'm the judge of what's worth putting in the newspaper," I said. "What's happening?"

"The school's security system went off, and the custodian who was on the premises found a trespasser. No break-in occurred. Nothing was harmed. Like I said, no news."

I looked around him and saw that the person surrounded by police was a teenage girl. "How many cops does it take to intimidate one scared kid?" I asked. "The way it looked from the street, I thought you had some kind of hostage situation happening. What was she doing here?"

"We don't know. We haven't been able to get much out of her."

"No wonder, with the brute squad terrorizing her." I sidestepped him and headed for the group on the steps. He reached out to grab my arm, holding me back, and I gave him my most

withering look. "I'm not doing this as a reporter. I'm doing it as a woman and a decent human being." I jerked my arm out of his grasp, and he didn't resist. He must have signaled the other cops because they stood back to let me approach the girl.

I sat next to her on the steps. It was hard to tell much about her, since she was hugging her bent knees to her chest and had her forehead pressed against her knees. Her back and shoulders shook like she was sobbing. "Hey," I said softly. "My name's Lexie. Do you want to talk? Can you tell me what's going on?"

She tilted her head just enough to look at me with one eye. "I don't know," she said, getting the words out between heaving sobs.

"You don't know why you're here?" She shook her head. I presumed that meant that, no, she didn't know why she was there. "What do you remember? Did someone make you come here?" She nodded. I looked up at the cops. "Have you considered that she was a diversion, someone for you to catch while someone else is up to something?"

Wes nodded at the other cops, who ran off to check the building's perimeter. "It's a scavenger hunt," the girl finally whispered, so softly I had to lean close to make out her words. "I was supposed to get something from that box on the building."

"What box on the building?" I asked.

"It's a control node for the building's security system," Wes said. "Tampering with it set off the alarm."

"Who sent you on the scavenger hunt?" I asked the girl.

She shrugged. "I don't know. There were notes in my locker. It's a game the senior girls are playing. I don't even know why I did it."

I patted her back reassuringly, only to get jolted by a burst of static electricity so strong that sparks lit up the night. Or was it static? If she was one of the electro people, she might have been able to affect the school's security system just by touching it. "What were you supposed to get in the box?"

"The next clue. I didn't know what the box was, honest."

Wes turned to the custodian, who lurked nearby. "Was any damage done?"

"Not that I could tell. She was still outside the school, and she didn't get the box open."

"Do you have to report this?"

The custodian glanced at the girl, and pity washed over his face. "False alarm," he said with an elaborate shrug. "Happens all the time."

"That's what I thought," Wes said with a nod. "False alarm. Thanks, though. Better safe than sorry."

The girl looked up at Wes, and I recognized her. She was the girl who'd received a scholarship at the Civic League meeting. "I'm not in trouble?"

"Not this time. Don't get caught here again. Do you need a ride home?"

The girl shook her head. "My car's over there."

"Then you'd better get home, and I'd suggest staying out of scavenger hunts for now."

"Thank you!" She jumped up and ran for the parking lot.

Wes turned to me. "This doesn't need to go in the paper."

"You really do think I'm a monster, don't you? I'm hardly going to make my career by breaking the shocking story of a kid found on school grounds at night. I'm not the one doing massive overkill here, responding with half the police department to a minor trespassing case."

"It's less than a quarter of the police department. And most of the time when there's an alarm at the high school, there's some serious criminal mischief going on. We need the manpower to grab all the vandals before they get away. This was a rare case in which there was no actual damage."

"I bet someone set her up."

"Do you have to turn everything into some big conspiracy?"

"Remember, I'm not doing a story on this. But I was once a teenage girl, and I was often the new girl in school, so I've seen my

share of mean girls stunts. Let me guess, this girl is a good student, National Honor Society and all that, not a blot on her record. Getting arrested would put a blot on her record, and she's old enough not to qualify as a juvenile, so it's a blot that would stick. There are mean kids who wouldn't be able to resist that opportunity, and they'd make it hurt even worse by setting her up in a way that makes her feel like she's being included in a game. She probably found several other clues that made it seem legitimate before they hit her with this one. They knew that her trying to open that box would set off the alarm." Or that her power would do something to set it off. I still wondered if it was a diversion or if they'd expected her to short-circuit the alarm so someone else could get in the building.

"That's diabolical. Surely that sort of thing doesn't happen here."

"You must have been utterly oblivious in high school."

"My dad was the police chief. I think everyone was too afraid of doing anything like that anywhere near me."

Cold was starting to seep through my jeans from the concrete step where I sat, so I stood. "Well, looks like my work here is done," I said as I headed toward my car. "Let me know if you need a counselor or hostage negotiator again."

"Thanks," he said, sounding only a teensy bit grudging. "What brought you by at just the right time?"

I started to scramble for some explanation other than chatting with his great-great-grandmother at the cemetery, but realized that I didn't owe him any explanation. "Just out and saw the lights when I passed by."

"Lucky Lexie strikes again, huh?"

I glanced around. "I wonder what became of your guys."

"Good question." He spoke into his radio. "Hey, Wallace, Smith. Did you find anything? Where are you?"

It was a moment before the radio crackled and a voice came over it, saying, "There was someone at the back door, but they ran

before we got there. They had too big a head start for us to catch up.”

“Seriously?” Wes said. “No doughnuts for you the rest of the week. You need to get in better shape. Did you get a good look at them?”

“Nope. They were all in black, with a ski mask. I’m pretty sure it was a woman. Smith stayed back there to make sure that wasn’t a diversion to get us away so someone else could sneak in.”

“Let’s keep an eye on the perimeter for the time being, and we’ll make sure the alarm is still working.” Wes nodded to the custodian, who still stood by. The custodian went off to the alarm control box. To me, but probably mostly to himself, Wes said, “That’s weird. Normally we get teenage boys or young men trying to break in to either steal stuff or trash the place. Not women.”

“That really would be the ultimate in diabolical mean girl stunts,” I said. “Not just set up the good girl to get in trouble, but also use her as a diversion for some other scheme. And, yeah, I know, not for the paper. For now, there’s nothing to report.”

But I was curious. Did this have anything to do with the other thefts?

IT WAS LATE when I got home, but instead of going up to my apartment, I went to the office and dug out some of the older editions of the newspaper from the paper’s morgue. The papers from that far back hadn’t yet been digitized, and there was no index that I’d found. The best I could do was flip through them. I carried the bound volume that contained the issue with the articles about the troupe’s arrival in town up to my apartment, made a cup of herbal tea, and settled down on the sofa to read, with a notebook and pen at hand to keep track of any sideshow acts that were mentioned. I hoped the work plus the incident at the school would put enough distance between the graveyard and sleep that I

wouldn't have nightmares about ghosts.

I'd barely begun when Jean joined me. "Did you learn anything good from the cemetery ghost?" she asked.

"Actually, yeah, once I convinced her that bad things would happen if someone didn't tell me what was going on, even if I am an outsider. The crystal amplifies talents. I got the impression that either something bad happened or they barely stopped something bad from happening when someone got too much juice from it, and they divided it among the troupe. Someone must have found out about the crystal recently, in spite of what was apparently a vow of silence, and they're trying to collect as much of it as possible."

"And you can be sure they're not doing it for some civic benefit."

"Well, yeah, considering they're stealing to get the crystals. Now we know *why* they're doing it. What we need to figure out is who and what they plan to do with it."

"And we need to stop them before they do anything dangerous."

I noticed that she said "we," but I was the one doing all the work since she couldn't leave the newspaper building. "Were there any bad seeds in the troupe when they came to town? Someone who might have done something dangerous?"

She shrugged. "They were all carnies, so they were a little rough around the edges. At least, to our very sheltered eyes. I remember that people here were wary about them at first. But there weren't any crimes associated with them. They were all hard workers. We didn't have a lot of jobs, since it was the Depression, but they pitched in on farms. A few alarmists tried to blame everything bad that happened on them, but it always turned out to be someone local who actually did it."

"Something you made sure to play up," I said, glancing at one of the old headlines that said, "Local Man Arrested in Crime Spree."

“It was the least I could do. Those people needed help. Many of them were foreign, so not only were they stuck in a strange town with no money and no connections, they were also in a strange country. A few did go back home or go off to join another show after they raised enough money to buy a train ticket out of here, but in those times, getting that much money and a little to spare to tide them over took a while, and by the time they could afford to leave, most of them had settled in, so they stayed.”

I tried to imagine what that must have been like. My dad had been in the air force, so I’d moved around a lot as a kid, but not constantly on the road the way the sideshow was. We at least lived in a place for a year or so before moving on. I was frequently the stranger in town, but I’d never been utterly alone, with no money. The closest I’d come to that had been when the combination of a murder investigation, car trouble, and an ice storm had stranded me here. Come to think of it, that had worked out a lot like it had for the sideshow. I’d found a job and ended up staying.

“So, we don’t have any leads,” I said, snapping myself out of my reverie. “We don’t even have a good way of knowing exactly who in town is descended from the sideshow people. I can see why they’d want to avoid that kind of census, but obviously someone has one in order to know who to hit. I could show you the photo of the people in the pact to see if you could identify any of them, but that wouldn’t tell us who’s descended from them and who has the crystals now. It would be really handy if someone could read minds and give us a suspect that way.”

“That’s not as useful a trait as you’d think. Apparently, they had a hard time telling whose mind they were reading in a crowd. Wandering through town and picking up stray thoughts doesn’t do much good.”

“You mean that power actually exists?”

“There were clairvoyants in the show.”

“For real?” As handy as that trait might be while investigating a murder, I didn’t like the idea that there were people in town who

could read my mind.

“Is that any odder than having a conversation with a ghost?”

“Or being able to zap things with a touch,” I said, remembering the girl at the school.

Still thinking about the girl, I wondered again about the hypnotist in the show. Had there been more than a scavenger hunt clue sending that girl to the school? She’d seemed so vague, like she wasn’t sure what she was doing there or how she got there. There had been a huge crystal in the hypnotist’s turban. The one on display now was clearly a fake, but was it a replacement for the real one after it was broken up and divided among the troupe? And had someone with that ability and a collection of crystals coerced the girl into trying to open the alarm box to create a diversion? “What about the hypnotist?” I asked.

“Ah, the Amazing Crenshaw. He had an interesting act. He could get almost anyone to do almost anything—and not just using audience plants, though he did use those from time to time.”

“You think it was a real gift?”

“It might have been. But one thing about all these acts is that the audience wants them to be real. They want to believe in magic. They practically hypnotize themselves.”

“Did you ever see him doing anything away from the show that looked like manipulation?”

“Not that I noticed. His family wasn’t all that successful, not in the way you’d expect from someone who could bend others to his will. I know he wasn’t too popular with the rest of the troupe.”

“Maybe because they’d caught him being shifty before.”

“Maybe.” But she didn’t sound convinced.

“Do you know who his descendants might be now?”

“I’m not sure. If they weren’t in the news, I didn’t notice them.”

“Why do I find that hard to believe?”

“Forty years after you die, we’ll see how well you remember things that happened when you were seventy, especially things like births and marriages among people you barely knew.”

“Okay, here’s another idea: Instead of tracing his descendants down the line, we could start with potential suspects and work back to find their origins.”

“I won’t be of much use to you there. Remember, dead forty years.” She faded from view in a way I found disconcerting, leaving me alone.

What I needed to figure out was if there was someone who’d had more success than you’d expect, someone with great powers of persuasion, or someone with a knack for getting out of trouble. Fortunately, the good part about starting from the present and working back was that the recent newspaper archives were online and they’d be an easy search.

Chapter Eleven

I got more sleep than I expected that night. The detour to the high school and new possibility for suspects seemed to have kept the graveyard nightmares away. I got to my desk early with my second cup of tea and started reviewing recent issues for signs of people who might have suddenly had a power boost, particularly one that involved persuasion. I didn't come across anything that stood out in the time since the thefts began.

Even if they hadn't yet used the boost from getting the crystals—at least, not in an obvious way—the thieves may have recently discovered their powers. I went back to earlier editions, looking for anyone who might have held sway over people.

The person who jumped out at me was Jordan. He was already wildly successful in the software industry, and he had managed to sell his company for a fortune, but that happened all the time in that business. However, since he'd returned to Stirling Mills, he'd managed to buy up most of the buildings in the downtown area, convince the city council to create a business improvement district, and got zoning changes fast-tracked for all the new businesses he was starting. Was that money talking, contagious enthusiasm, or something else?

I didn't really want it to be him. I liked Jordan. He was friendly and generous—or was that what he wanted me to think about him? In his favor was the fact that he'd had all his success and his local wins before the thefts, so I couldn't imagine why he'd need a

power boost from the crystals. I also couldn't think of any connection he had to students who might have got that girl involved in the scavenger hunt diversion.

The bells on the door jingled, startling me out of my thoughts. I looked up to see a middle-aged Black woman wearing a sharp tweed suit. "You're Lexie, aren't you?" she asked, and I recognized the deep, pleasant voice of the woman from the graveyard the night before.

"And you must be Charlene," I said, rising and coming around my desk to shake her hand. "It's good to meet you in daylight." She wasn't quite what I'd pictured. She looked like she could either be a bank president or school principal, with her suit, sensible pumps, and her graying hair pulled back in a bun. I'd expected someone who made a habit of visiting the cemetery at night to commune with ghosts to look like more of a free spirit, either a new-age hippy type or a goth. Either way, there would be flowing layers and wild hair rather than a neat and businesslike appearance.

"I wanted to see if you were serious about that job."

"Yes, I am. Please, have a seat. Would you like some tea? I'd offer you coffee, but I don't drink it, so I don't have any. We can get a coffeemaker, though, if you want coffee. That would probably be a good idea, anyway. Maybe one of those pod things that makes one cup at a time since a pot would probably just sit around until we had to throw it out." I was babbling, I realized. Conducting my first job interview from the perspective of the one doing the hiring was a little overwhelming, especially since I was unprepared.

"Tea is fine, thank you," she said, sitting in the chair beside my desk and resting her handbag on her knees.

While I brewed the tea, I called out, "Jean, you should probably be here for this," then turned to Charlene. "Sorry if that's weird, but if you're going to work here, you'd better get used to it now."

Jean materialized, today wearing the sort of pantsuit that Katharine Hepburn made famous, complete with rakishly tilted

fedora. "You found a candidate for the job?" she asked.

"This is Charlene Robinson. We met at the cemetery last night. Since she makes a habit of talking to ghosts, I thought she might do well here."

"I believe we've met," Jean said. "You won the school journalism contest and had your essay published in the paper."

"You remember that?" Charlene asked. "I'm impressed." No one would know from watching her that she was talking to a ghost. There wasn't even the slightest bit of freak-out. I figured that if she regularly talked to her family spirits, she didn't see ghosts as threatening.

"You didn't become a reporter?"

"I wanted more job security than that. I couldn't afford to go chasing dreams. I became a teacher. Then I married and had children. The children are grown now, and my husband's retired and driving me mad. A job might be just the thing for me. Maybe it's not too late for me to be a reporter."

"Hire her," Jean told me. "I like her."

"I do, too," I said with a smile, and Jean poofed away. "I'll have to discuss things like salary and benefits with the board, since they control the purse strings, but they already told me I could hire someone. The question is whether you want the job. Most of it won't be too exciting, just keeping the office going while I'm out on assignment, and that means taking calls from the public, which isn't always fun."

"I taught junior high. I can handle pretty much everything."

"Yeah, that's about the mentality we're usually dealing with. And I bet you'd also be good at nagging the regular contributors like the churches and schools to turn in their information on time."

"They may be late once, but they won't be again," she said with a fierce glare.

I was about to get into the possibility of writing assignments when the door bells jingled again and a woman stormed in, clearly on a mission. "Where's the editor?" she demanded.

“Excuse me for a moment,” I said to Charlene before saying, “I’m the editor. How may I help you?”

“I need to change something that’s in the paper.”

“I’m afraid that once it’s gone to print, it can’t be changed. Do we need to print a correction?”

She looked at me like I’d lost my mind. “I need to change something for the next paper. We already sent in the information about the book review club at the senior center, but we need to change it.”

“Of course, I can take care of that for you. What do you need to change?”

“There’s a new club that will be meeting at the garden club building. Same book, same day, same time.”

“Um, okay,” I said, jotting down the info. “Did you get big enough to need to split into two groups?”

“No! It’s just that some of us don’t want to meet with *them* anymore. They’re probably thieves.”

I had to fight not to show my dismay. Then again, maybe she knew something. “What makes you think the other book club members are the thieves?”

The phone rang. I decided to let it ring and go to the answering machine rather than interrupting the conversation, but before it rang a second time, Charlene picked it up and said smoothly, “Stirling Mills *Gazette*, how may I help you?” She listened to the response, picked up a pen from my desk, and took notes.

Relieved from that duty, I focused on the book club lady. “They’ve been acting shady and suspicious,” she said. “And one of them knew something about what was inside my house.”

“Oh, were you one of the victims?” I asked.

“No—not that I know of. But what if they got in, didn’t find what they wanted, and left?”

I couldn’t argue with that lack of logic, so I smiled and nodded and thanked her for coming by. She left, stomping out the way she’d come in.

Charlene hung up the phone and handed me the notes she'd taken in textbook-worthy penmanship. "They're starting a second crime watch group in the historic district," she said. "It seems they don't trust the members of the first group not to be the thieves."

I groaned. "I hate what this is doing to this town. These are such minor crimes, but they're really hurting people, even those who aren't victims." For one thing, they were ruining my small-town peace before I'd had a chance to experience it.

"It is a real pity," she agreed.

"Thank you so much for answering the phone, by the way. That was a big help."

"I figure it counts as an audition."

"Which you won. Anyway, back to the job. Most of the writing I need you to do would be stuff like turning the info from the wedding notice form into an actual article, but I'm sure there will be opportunities for you to do more reporting, if you want."

"I'm getting a little old to dig through people's trash or chase down bad guys, so I'll leave that up to you," Charlene said. "I'd rather sit in here and answer the phone than sit at home with my husband all day. I love the man, but he's driving me crazy. You'd think I'd have figured out how to keep house after all these years, but he seems to know better. Well, he can manage it all while I bring in a paycheck, for a change."

"Even I don't do a lot of digging through trash or chasing down bad guys," I said.

"I understand you caught a murderer."

"That was mostly because of being able to talk to ghosts, not because I'm a reporter. Most of what we do here isn't that exciting."

She gave a low chuckle. "I've been reading that paper for years. I know what I'm getting into."

The bells on the door jingled again, and I braced myself, but it was only Evelyn. "Oh, you're busy," she said. "I just stopped by to see how last night went, but I can come back."

“No, come in,” I said. “Evelyn, do you know Charlene?”

“Oh yes, we’ve met.” She came over to where Charlene was sitting. “So nice to see you.”

“I’d like to hire her as an assistant. She can talk to ghosts, and Jean wants to hire her. She’s already proven valuable.”

“I thought you’d find someone. I’ll talk to the others. I’m sure they’ll approve, but we’ll have to work out a salary package.”

“That sounds good to me,” Charlene said.

I didn’t have an official employment application, so I had her write her contact information on a legal pad. Evelyn promised to get back to her with an official offer as soon as possible.

When Charlene was gone, Evelyn took the seat she’d vacated. “Did you see any ghosts at the cemetery?”

“A bunch, including one I’m pretty sure was your grandmother, though she didn’t look anything like her picture. She was really focused on the crystal, so I did get some information from her.” I summed up what I’d learned. “Did you know anything about this?”

“No. They must have been serious about the pact of silence. I suppose they thought if the knowledge faded away, no one would think to reunite the crystal.”

“Well, someone obviously blabbed or kept records because they know what they’re looking for. I have a theory that may be a bit out there. I was thinking maybe the hypnotist from the sideshow was the culprit back then, and now his descendants are trying to get the crystal back.”

“Hmm, that is a thought. There would certainly be a point to amplifying that talent. They might even be coercing people into helping them, and that’s how they’ve managed to hit so many houses without being caught.”

I hadn’t even thought of that angle. “Ooh, I wonder if any of those people who had no sign of a break-in might have opened their doors to the thieves and then forgot about it entirely. Do you know any of the Amazing Crenshaw’s descendants?”

“Unfortunately, no. Even they may not know who they are.

There are probably a lot of people in town totally unaware of their heritage. A few generations of marriages and name changes, maybe a family rift or possibly even a pregnancy of unknown origins, and the people around today might have no idea.”

“Pregnancy of unknown origins?” I pictured ghost babies.

She gave me a wry look. “Come, now, Lexie, you’re not that naive. Not every child is fathered by a man the mother is married to. We might notice unwed mothers, but there have been cases when married women dallied outside their marriages, and in the days before DNA tests you couldn’t be sure whose the child was. Even when it was obvious from looking at them, it was best not to say anything.”

“I bet a hypnotist who really had powers wouldn’t have had any trouble getting women into bed,” I said.

“Exactly. Official family trees won’t tell the whole story.” She reached into her handbag and pulled out a photo print, which she handed to me. It was the pact photo. “This might help you. I’m on the board of the museum, so I got you a copy made.”

“Thanks!”

“I’m afraid I can’t identify anyone other than my grandmother and Lupe’s grandmother.”

“I might be able to check against newspaper photos and figure out a few more, and I’m sure Jean can help. I’m more interested in getting a look at the jewelry. I want to compare it to the pieces I know have been stolen. Then we should know how many more pieces are out there.”

“That should be interesting. Do let me know what you learn.”

“Speaking of the jewelry, you’ll want this back.” I removed her brooch from my purse and handed it to her.

She pressed it back into my hand. “Can I prevail upon you to keep it for now? Until we get to the bottom of this, I’d rather it be somewhere no one would think to look.” With a smile, she added, “And how was my grandmother?”

“Spooky. I think her ties here are weak.”

“Maybe once all this is dealt with, she can let go and move on to her eternal rest.”

After she left, I pulled up my notes on the theft reports and compared them to the jewelry worn by the women of the pact. The picture was a copy of a copy, which was probably a copy, itself, so the resolution wasn't great. The peacock brooch was pretty obvious, as was Evelyn's butterfly. There was another butterfly, as well as a few others that matched my notes. I wished I'd had a better look at the jewelry that had been returned. That would have made this easier. I guessed on matching a few more from my notes. Marybeth's pendant wasn't obvious, but there were a couple of women without brooches visible. As far as I could tell, Evelyn's brooch was just about the only one that hadn't yet been stolen, which meant the thief almost had a complete set. It was good that she'd left it with me because the thieves would probably hit her next.

I forced myself to put all that aside and get to work, since I did have a newspaper to put out. So far, I didn't have any big stories for the week, just the usual school news. I went through my filed news releases and found the one about the Spring Blossom Carnival. I remembered what Lenora at the museum had said about her family doing their act at town carnivals. I wondered if there might be a hypnotist doing a show there. I pulled up the papers from the previous year to get a better sense of what went on at this carnival. I figured I'd need to know, anyway, to plan my coverage, and I might learn something about the case while I was at it, effectively killing two birds with one stone.

It turned out that this wasn't just a little local Saturday festival with a few booths and a Spring Blossom Queen crowned during it. The crowning of the queen was a full beauty pageant-type event, complete with production numbers and the queen candidates being saluted by duchesses representing just about every organization in town. That happened on Friday night, followed by a parade on Saturday morning, and then the carnival, with the newly crowned

queen and all her court starring in the parade and carnival. The queen candidates were being elected this week, which seemed to me like a good opportunity to use an amped-up ability to influence others.

Though, surely, no one would spend weeks breaking into people's homes just to be crowned queen of some local festival. There had to be something bigger at stake. Being able to influence others might be helpful for running a con like getting investors for a fake business. Local elections were coming up in May. That was another option.

Then again, there was the incident at the school the night before, which I couldn't help but connect to these cases. What if a high school student was behind all this? She could be influencing her friends—or forcing her rivals—to help her. To a teenager, being crowned the queen might be a big enough deal to make it all worthwhile. The queen got a small scholarship, and that might be worth it.

I saw Lenora's family's acrobatics act pictured in last year's coverage, along with a strong man and fortune-teller. There was a variety of games, concerts, and rides. But no hypnotist. I noted that I'd need to dedicate more or less a full issue to the event, and it would be a larger edition. The paper had full coverage of the carnival, the parade, and the Friday-night pageant. There was barely any news about anything else in the week before and the week after the event, and that had been under my predecessor, who disdained small-town life. The queen had a full portrait on the front page, so it looked like we'd need to arrange a photo shoot for that night, unless they had her come in later in her gown. She wore a sash declaring her to be the Spring Blossom Queen, and she carried a bouquet that looked like a collection of wildflowers. Her crown looked familiar.

Then I realized where I'd seen it before. It was the fortuneteller's tiara, and it had an awfully big crystal in it.

Chapter Twelve

I tingled all over. This was it, I knew. The tiara had to be a key to the case. It was related to the sideshow, it had belonged to someone who might have had powers, and it had a big crystal in it. I felt like the pieces were starting to come together.

I called out to Jean. She took her sweet time appearing, and I wondered if I'd caught her at a bad time. What amounted to a 'bad time' in the afterlife, anyway? "You do realize that you work for me, and not the other way around," she remarked as she materialized sitting on the corner of my desk. "I'm not at your beck and call."

"What about we make a deal—you don't pop into my apartment unless I invite you, and I won't demand your presence in the office," I said. I figured that would be a win-win for me, since I'd get either privacy or a ghost on demand.

"You drive a tough bargain kiddo, but it's a deal. Now, what did you want in this, your last chance to summon me?"

"Did you ever see this tiara?" I pointed at the picture on the computer screen.

"Isn't that the one the fortune-teller used in the show?"

"Looks like it to me. I was hoping you'd know. It's the tiara they give the Spring Blossom Queen."

"Really? That's not what I recall from back in my day."

"It's been going on that long?"

She struck a pose. "You're looking at the Spring Blossom Queen

of 1919. And I wasn't the first. We definitely didn't use that crown in my day, and they were still using the same one I had when I transitioned to a higher plane."

"So this is relatively new, even though the tiara's been here since the thirties. Interesting."

"Why?"

I pointed to the picture again. "That's a pretty big crystal. And it's associated with the sideshow. You've got to wonder if that's a part of the same crystal. If so, the thieves are bound to go after it, maybe using the festival as an opportunity. Or maybe they already have. Do they keep the tiara at the school?"

"They kept the old one in the school trophy case. I don't know about this one."

"That might explain the attempted break-in last night. That would be the big prize, and maybe they needed all the other crystals to be able to pull that off. The trophy case would be too visible during the school day, and the school is secured at night. They needed to con that girl into getting into the alarm box to create a diversion, and it almost worked." I didn't think it would be tactful to point out to Wes that I was the one who'd thought of that. Otherwise, the thieves might have made it through the back door while the cops were mobbing around the girl. Not that I could tell Wes what the thieves had been after or why since I got the information from ghosts.

"They're playing for keeps if they're doing something that'll affect the coronation," Jean said. "That amounts to blasphemy in this town. You'd better stop anything from happening."

"I'm working on it," I said, but she'd already disappeared. I needed to add other terms of ghostly etiquette to our deal. Just ghosting me—literally—was rude.

Evelyn called me an hour later to give me the job offer for Charlene and to tell me our IT person, Tami, would come by after school to set up a computer for Charlene. Charlene accepted the offer, and we made plans for her to start Friday so I could show her

the ropes on the slow day after getting this week's issue to press.

Later that afternoon, while Tami—who was a teenage whiz kid—fiddled with the computer she'd brought, she said, "Weren't you the one who found that box of stolen jewelry?"

"Yes. Why? Did you have something stolen?"

"I don't know. I had a necklace go missing a few weeks ago. It was something I got from my grandmother. I thought I just lost it in gym class, but then I heard about all the other thefts, and that made me wonder if someone swiped it and if it might have been in that box."

"You'll have to check with Wes." I looked at the photo and decided the necklace might account for the second woman without a brooch, which meant Evelyn's brooch was the only one that hadn't yet been stolen, aside from the tiara. If Tami had lost a necklace at school, that might confirm my suspicion that one of the thieves was a student.

Tami nodded. "Yeah, that's what I figured. You didn't see a necklace that was like a flower with a crystal in the middle, did you?"

"I didn't get a good look in the box. Sorry."

"No prob. Just thought I'd check." She sighed and bent over the computer, typing. "Okay, this should do it. I'll put the log-in info on a card, but don't leave it lying around."

"Thanks." As she packed up her things, it occurred to me that a student might be able to give me some insight. "Before you go, what do you know about this Spring Blossom Carnival pageant?"

She rolled her eyes and groaned. "Think the royal wedding meets a debutante ball meets the Miss America pageant. But smaller and more boring. And yet everyone thinks it's a big deal, like the queen really will rule the town instead of just riding on a parade float."

Was that because the queen's tiara actually had some power, even if they didn't know that? A queen who had a special ability might have it enhanced while she was wearing the tiara, if I was

right about it. “So it’s pretty major around here?”

“Don’t plan on putting much else in the newspaper for a couple of weeks, not unless you want to leave town in a hurry, barely ahead of a mob bearing pitchforks and torches.”

“What’s it all about?”

“Feeding the egos of the town queen bees. And I think they raise some money for local charities and the funding for the prom. But mostly it’s an excuse for the patriarchy to pit women against each other in a competition for masculine attention.”

“What does that actually look like?”

“Well, it starts this week when they elect the queen candidates and the court. The campaigning has been going on for a while. At least that means I’m getting plenty of free chocolate—that’s how they bribe the voters. The court includes duchesses from every class and representing just about every organization in the school and in the town. By the way, you can’t make me represent the newspaper this year. I’m already the duchess for the computer club. The other girls and I did rock-paper-scissors and I lost.”

“Do I have to have a duchess for the paper?”

“Nah. You could always claim journalistic neutrality. But every girl who’s ever had anything to do with the paper may be hitting you up as a way of getting on the court. Anyway, they put on this whole show that looks like a beauty pageant, only less interesting. There’s no talent or interview questions, or anything like that. It’s purely a popularity contest. The queen candidates just sit around while there are a couple of bad production numbers and all the duchesses walk down the aisle and bow to them. They announce the winner and stick a crown on her head. The next day there’s a parade, with the whole court riding in convertibles or on floats that are just decorated trailers pulled by tractors and trucks, and then there’s a carnival with rides, games, and entertainment. That part’s pretty cool and can be a lot of fun.”

“It sounds like something in a movie.” And right out of the kinds of visions I’d started having the moment I set eyes on this

town.

“That’s exactly it. Beware, you’ll be a city girl at a small-town festival, so you’d better look out for the down-to-earth local guy wearing flannel. People come in from the surrounding country, so there will be lots of farmers.” She grimaced. “But if any of them are young and hot, I haven’t seen them around town.”

“I’ll be too busy working to have time for that sort of thing,” I said, hoping my flaming cheeks didn’t give me away. I already had a clash of opposites, bickering relationship with a local guy, though I couldn’t picture him wearing plaid flannel. And he was more likely to arrest me than fall in love with me. “Would anyone do something shady to win this thing?”

“You mean, other than passing out candy like it’s Halloween? I don’t know, maybe. Depends.”

“People run for queen?”

“Not technically. You don’t have to declare candidacy or throw your hat in the ring, or anything like that. It’s supposed to be a write-in nomination. Everyone writes in up to three names of senior girls, then the four who get the most nominations are the candidates. Theoretically, it’s spontaneous, the girls everyone thinks of first. But the ones who want it make sure everyone knows they want it and make sure their names are top of mind. It’s not like student council elections, where they make posters and give campaign speeches. It’s more subtle, stuff like handing out candy ‘just to be nice,’ getting their friends to talk them up, ragging on the competition.”

“Sabotage?” I asked, my mental wheels already turning.

“Nothing too obvious. They’d have to be careful about it backfiring, so nothing like tripping a rival in the cafeteria so that she falls down and gets food all over herself. That might generate sympathy for the victim or make that person top of mind just in time for voting.”

“What about setting a rival up to take the blame for a crime?”

“I wouldn’t put it past some of these girls. They act like it’s

actually important.”

“Who are the ones likely to be on the list?”

She tilted her head to the side in thought. “Well, there are the usual suspects, like Kaylee Crocker, the head cheerleader, and Kylie Kennedy, the head twirler. They’ve been going all-in on the candy, and the good stuff, too. Full-size bars, not those bite-size things. Jenny Wilson isn’t campaigning, but she’s probably pretty high on the list, though that’s just because people like her. And that’s probably because she doesn’t do social media at all, so she’s kind of an enigma and has fewer opportunities to say mean things to or about people. But she wasn’t in school today.” Her tone darkened, like she knew why.

If I wasn’t mistaken, Jenny was the girl at the school the night before, and if she was a potential queen nominee, that explained a lot. “I know what happened with Jenny,” I said. “Do you think it was sabotage?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like she cares about this stuff. That scavenger hunt thing’s been going on for a while. Everyone’s been playing. But this was the first clue that ended up being shady, which makes me suspicious. Fortunately, nothing really happened. She was just freaked out enough that she didn’t want to be in school today.”

If Jenny was popular enough to be considered a queen nominee, that killed my theory about her being an unpopular girl being bullied, but a rival still might have tried to take her out of the running.

“Then there’s Latisha Robinson,” Tami continued, “but she’s not really campaigning, either. She’s the one the jocks are pushing, reminding everyone that she made the all-state team in basketball. I’ll probably vote for her because she’s cool and I like the idea of someone outside the usual twirler and cheerleader contingent being recognized.”

I figured that had to be a relative of Charlene’s and, if so, I imagined I could strike her off the suspect list because I knew her

family wasn't connected to the sideshow, so it was unlikely that she'd have a way of knowing about the crystals. Plus, I couldn't imagine wanting to amplify the ability to see ghosts, and that power wouldn't do much good in getting the crown, unless she was planning to scare people into voting for her. Then again, she might still have some connection to the sideshow through whoever had married into the family, and that might mean she had a different gift. I couldn't eliminate her entirely.

"Are there any girls who are inexplicably popular? Like, you've got to wonder if there's some kind of mind control going on because otherwise there's no reason anyone would like this person?"

"Isn't that the way high school popularity usually is? It's generally the meanest girl in school who's the most popular, and it makes no sense. Jenny and Latisha are the rare exceptions. Wasn't it that way for you?"

"I went to high school overseas on a military base. The social dynamics were totally different."

"Lucky." She hefted her bag onto her shoulder. "Need anything else?"

"No. That's it for now. Thanks."

Once she was gone, I leaned back in my chair, thinking. Was it merely a coincidence that the thefts had happened leading up to the pageant where the tiara was the prize? I needed to know more about the tiara, and I knew just the person to ask.

MARGARITA WAS DESCENDED from the sideshow's fortune-teller, so maybe she knew something of the family history. I headed to the Mexican restaurant for dinner that evening, purely for information gathering, of course. Eating enchiladas was just the price I'd have to pay for carrying out my duties. I got two for the price of one when I arrived and saw that Margarita's grandmother, Lupe, was

sitting in a corner, playing guitar. She was a world-renowned classical guitarist, and she graced her granddaughter's restaurant with a performance when the mood struck her. She was even more likely than Margarita to have the answers I needed.

Lupe played softly enough that her music could be a background to conversation rather than taking over the restaurant, but I still hated to talk while she was playing. I just sat and listened instead of worrying about ordering. She really was good, pouring intense passion into the soft music. I could hear stories coming out of her fingers. She finished her set and came to sit at the bar near me. "That was amazing," I said.

"My fingers don't move like they once did," she said with a casual shrug, "but I like to keep my skills up, and Margarita indulges me."

"Because the average check is bigger when you're here," Margarita said as she brought me chips and salsa.

"I wanted to ask you about something entirely unrelated," I said to Lupe after I gave Margarita my order. "I've been doing some research on that Spring Blossom Carnival so that I'll know what kind of coverage is expected, and it looks like the tiara the queen gets is the one your grandmother used in the sideshow."

"It is! You've got a good eye. I donated it a few years ago. I thought it would be a way to incorporate the sideshow history into this town's history. The old crown was falling apart—literally. A piece of it fell off during the coronation. I gave them the tiara to use for the parade and carnival the next day, since it's not as though there are a lot of crowns just lying around town, and they've been using it ever since then."

I resisted the urge to give a fist pump of triumph. I was right about the tiara, which meant I might be right about it being the thieves' next target. I tried to think of how to phrase my next question. Lupe knew I could talk to ghosts, since she was part of the newspaper board, but I didn't know if Evelyn had let her in on what I'd learned from her grandmother. "I wonder if it might fall

into the same category as the other sideshow-related jewelry that's being stolen. Would the thieves come after the tiara? There was an attempted break-in at the high school last night."

"I hope they don't disrupt the festival by taking it. There's not likely anyone else keeping a tiara lying around to replace it with at the last minute."

Steeling myself, I plunged in with my real question. "Have you ever noticed anything about it enhancing any abilities you might have?"

She arched one perfectly groomed dark eyebrow. "You must have been talking to some of the more superstitious old-timers. I don't think it enhanced anything other than my ancestors' image as exotic princesses who could tell the future. The whole thing was a parlor trick." With a wink, she added, "Then again, I've never worn it. Maybe it does have powers."

She slid off her seat and went back to her guitar. "What was all that about?" Margarita asked when she brought my food.

"I was just talking to your grandmother about the Spring Blossom tiara she donated. I thought it might be the next target of the thieves."

"What's a target of the thieves?" Wes asked as he took the seat next to me at the bar. I hadn't noticed his arrival.

"The tiara for the festival," Margarita said.

He groaned. "Oh, that thing. The school resource officer mentioned that he caught some kids trying to get into the trophy case. The principal locked the tiara up in his office overnight."

"Do you think it might be connected to the jewelry thefts?"

"Why would it be?"

"Some of the jewelry was stolen from the school, including Tami's necklace, so it's a good bet that at least one of the thieves is a student."

"More likely it's the time-honored tradition of the school prank. Every year, a group of kids who thinks the pageant is silly steals the tiara and does something with it to mock the idea of it. Last

year, there were pictures of a cow in a blond wig and a beauty queen sash wearing the tiara. It's also graced statues and scarecrows. We always track it down pretty quickly and have it in plenty of time for the pageant."

I was tempted to tell him what I knew, but as skeptical as he'd been about the thefts themselves, what would he think about the idea that someone was stealing crystals to enhance their uncanny abilities? He'd never said anything that suggested he believed in any of that stuff. I had a credibility problem with him to begin with. The last thing I needed was for him to think I was a total fruit loop.

Still, I was fairly certain that the tiara crystals were part of the original one that had been split up, and if the tiara was next on the thieves' list, they were sure to make another attempt at stealing it. They'd possibly failed twice at the school, both at night and during the school day, but I doubted they'd give up so easily. If we knew they were going after the tiara, that would give us a chance to catch them. I doubted they'd make a go at it in the principal's office. What we needed was to bait a trap—put it in an easily secured place that was also public enough to be tempting and easy to watch.

Again, I didn't dare say anything to Wes. He'd accuse me of watching too much TV and blowing it all out of proportion. But there were other approaches I could take.

After Wes finished eating and left, Lupe joined me at the bar once more. "I think people would be interested in the history of the tiara," I said to her. "It might make a fun feature to go along with the festival coverage. You wouldn't mind talking about your family and their role in the sideshow, would you?"

"Not at all. I'd love to talk about it."

"Great. Let's set something up. I also think people would enjoy getting to see it up close before the festival. Maybe they should move it to somewhere more public, like one of the museums. No one but students can see it in the school trophy case. The museum

security might even discourage the pranksters from trying to steal it.”

“That’s a wonderful idea. I’ll mention it to the organizing committee, and I’m sure the principal would be happy to cooperate.”

Wes was going to kill me, I feared, but I felt like I’d done him a favor. As soon as someone tried to steal it, we’d have our thief.

Chapter Thirteen

The next morning, I got a call from Lupe. “Good news!” she said when I answered. “I chatted with the organizing committee and the principal about your idea for the tiara, and they’re moving it to the town museum this afternoon. I’m sure you’ll want to be there to do an article. It’s going to be a big spectacle.”

“Oh wow, great,” I said, trying to show more enthusiasm than I felt. It had been my idea, so I couldn’t very well refuse to cover it, even if I didn’t think it was all that newsworthy. I just wanted it in a place I could stake out. I got the details from her and texted the photographers.

That afternoon, I headed to the high school to see the infamous tiara removed. It looked like the whole student body was gathered in the school foyer to watch the principal unlock the trophy case—where he must have just put the tiara after hiding it in his office—and remove the tiara. He handed it to a young woman wearing a beauty contest sash, who raised it above her head to show it off as the students cheered halfheartedly. I wasn’t close enough to see details of the tiara, but it certainly wasn’t all that exciting, unless there was more to its crystals than met the eye. The young woman—the reigning queen, I presumed—reverently placed the tiara on her head as camera flashes went off. The police chief offered her his elbow and escorted her outside to where a line of police vehicles waited. You’d have thought they were moving the crown jewels, complete with giant diamonds.

While the dignitaries took their places in the waiting cars, I dashed to my car, which I'd parked at the far end of the lot. I drove across town to the museum and got there ahead of the motorcade. The other photographer was already in place. It was probably overkill for the event, but this week's issue was light so far, and lots of photos would fill it up. The crowd at the museum wasn't nearly as big as the one at the school, but there were a few people gathered.

Police vehicles with flashing lights pulled up in front of the museum, followed by a parade of cars and more police vehicles. The former queen rode in a convertible like she was in a parade, and Lupe looked even more regal in another convertible. The police chief got out of the lead vehicle and, flanked by Wes and another officer, met the queen and escorted her into the museum. Wes shot me a dirty look as he passed me, and I made a face back at him. I might have said something that had set this in motion, but all this ceremony had nothing to do with me.

Once the procession had passed, the spectators followed the dignitaries into the museum, where a display case stood open in the middle of the room. Jordan stood near the case, and I suppressed a groan. Wes was *really* not going to like this, and Jordan being at all involved was not my fault. I had nothing to do with including him.

Lupe came to stand beside me. "Isn't this exciting?" she whispered.

"It's definitely an occasion," I replied, fighting to keep a straight face.

The town's mayor cleared his throat and gestured for silence, then said, "As we begin the countdown to the Spring Blossom Carnival, we're pleased to observe the moving of the queen's tiara to the town museum, where all the citizens will be able to view it." He spoke as though this whole thing was a time-honored tradition and not a last-second whim.

From where I stood, I had a good view of the tiara. It was even

less impressive in person than in pictures. It really did look like a cheap carnival prop, but there was something about the way the stones in it caught the light that suggested they weren't just glass. I wondered what ability, if any, the outgoing queen had and if she'd noticed it growing stronger while she wore her crown. There wasn't a good way to ask that without sounding like an utter lunatic.

The police chief stepped up and said, "I understand it's another time-honored tradition for pranksters to steal the tiara, but you'll be foiled this year. This display case is protected by a security system designed by Jordan Randall. We can't share details because we don't want to tip off any thieves, but it's safe to say that we'll know the moment someone tries to tamper with this case." I didn't think that the small assortment of mostly elderly local dignitaries had any nefarious schemes planned. He should have made that speech at the school.

The queen removed the tiara and handed it to the chief, who placed it in the case, closed it, and locked it. Jordan pushed a few buttons on the wall console and said, "The case is now armed. Let's see what happens." He walked over to the case and tapped on the glass, and an earsplitting siren sounded. "And it's armed on top, too, so nobody can drop in through the roof." He gave a self-aware smirk that showed he knew just how ludicrous that was. Then again, there were some pretty agile acrobats in this town. Maybe it wasn't too far-fetched that someone could pull off a *Mission Impossible* maneuver.

Jordan tapped some buttons and the siren stopped assaulting our ears. I had to bite my lip to hold back the laughter that threatened to spill out when the ridiculousness of all this struck me. We were protecting a costume prop like it was the Hope Diamond, and it had been my idea. In my defense, there was possibly more to it than met the eye, and I wanted the tiara protected not because the festival was so important, but because the crystals in it could have magical powers. Come to think of it,

that didn't make it sound much better.

After the formal part of the ceremony ended, Wes came over to me, and I braced myself for his wrath. He didn't seem too upset, though. He didn't exactly look cheerful, but he also wasn't seething with rage. "Why do I have a feeling you were behind this?" he said.

"This"—I gestured at all the dignitaries mingling around the display case—"wasn't my idea. Just the part about moving the tiara to the museum. I didn't think they'd make such a big deal out of it."

"Well, thanks. Now I'm stuck coordinating security for a cheap costume prop, and it's my career if someone steals it. As though I don't have anything better to do around here."

"Hey, don't blame that on me. I didn't mention you at all."

He gave me a sheepish grin. "Sorry. You're the only one I can complain to without losing my job." His eyes widened with alarm. "You're not going to print anything about me complaining, are you?"

"You really do think I'm a monster, don't you?"

"Let's just say I've had some bad experiences with reporters. Ogden would have covered the front page with a headline like 'Local Cop Criticizes Tiara Security.'"

"Jean must have hated him," I muttered.

"What?"

"It sounds like it's a miracle he didn't get killed sooner."

"There were definitely a lot of suspects."

"Well, don't worry, people griping about their jobs isn't news to me, and I don't think most of my readers care. If you quit dramatically or refuse to provide security for a cheap costume tiara, then I might have a story. Thinking it's a bit silly is just being normal. In fact, I'm kind of surprised that it matters that much."

"It's not the tiara itself, but what it represents, a history going back more than a century."

"But it's only been used for the Spring Blossom Queen for a few

years.”

“Without it, there would be no queen, unless someone has an old Burger King crown lying around.”

“Surely someone has a princess costume. Or couldn’t they use the homecoming queen crown?”

He gasped in mock horror. “But that’s for the homecoming queen! You can’t mix up your queens. You didn’t have this sort of thing where you grew up?”

“It’s hard to establish traditions when you have just about complete turnover of the population every few years. I guess there were local festivals when I lived overseas, and some of them have been going on for centuries, so there were probably even more sacred traditions than there are here, but I was an outsider and didn’t realize what they were.”

“Must have been nice,” he said with a tone so wistful that I actually felt bad for him.

“Oh, I don’t know. I was always just a spectator rather than being part of things.”

“That must have been good training for what you do now.”

I couldn’t help but flinch. He’d hit pretty close with that one, but I didn’t detect any hint of malice on his face or in his tone. He wasn’t trying to hurt me. He was merely being observant. “I thought you were just criticizing me for getting too involved.” He opened his mouth and took a breath, but before he could speak to defend himself, I added, “Really, all I did was throw out an idea, and Lupe ran with it. And now it looks like it might become a tradition.”

“Yeah, if you do something once around here, it’s suddenly a sacred tradition. Next year, they’ll act like they always moved the tiara to the museum before the queen candidates are selected. In the future, be careful what you say to Lupe. She can turn an idle thought into an event.”

“On the bright side, if someone tries to steal the tiara now, you’ll know about it. Maybe this will discourage the pranksters.”

And the thieves.

“Or they’ll see it as a challenge.” He grinned. “And it could be interesting if they find a way past that security system.”

“Remember, though, before they can make Jordan look bad by defeating his security, they have to make you look bad by getting past your patrols.”

He sighed, looking for all the world like a kid whose mother has told him he has to eat the rest of his broccoli before he can have any pie. I patted him on the arm and went over to the photographer to make sure he had all the shots I wanted. I didn’t dare tell Wes that I was hoping the thieves weren’t discouraged. I hoped this would be our chance to catch them.

THAT NIGHT, I put on dark clothing and headed out for a stakeout of the museum. By then, I was sure the whole town knew the tiara had been moved. Those giant crystals had to be tempting, promising great power.

I took my position in the shadows of a monument in the park near the railroad and museum. The museum entrance was blocked from view by the sideshow museum car, but I had a good view of the approach to the museum in all directions. I didn’t think anyone could pass without me seeing them, especially since this end of town was pretty deserted. The diner closed at seven, and there hadn’t been a car or pedestrian nearby since then.

I wasn’t entirely sure what I’d do if I did see a burglar. I’d call the police, of course, and I hoped I could get a good look at them, maybe a photo. If I had to, I could try tackling them. Everything I’d learned suggested it was a woman, so I could probably take her. Just as long as I didn’t have to outrun her, I thought, remembering that short foot chase down the alley.

It wasn’t the most exciting night I’d ever spent. The only bit of action came when I saw headlights approaching. I flattened myself

against the monument and buried my face in the hood of my sweatshirt so I wouldn't be visible to anyone passing by. It would be hard to explain what I was doing if someone thought I looked suspicious and called the cops on me. Or worse, if someone took pity on me, thinking I was homeless, and tried to give me shelter.

A glance at the passing car told me it was the police. That could be even more awkward. I didn't think I was breaking any laws. I hadn't seen a sign giving operating hours for the park. They probably couldn't ticket me or arrest me, but I would still have to explain myself to Wes.

The headlights passed without slowing or stopping, and I let myself relax. After another half hour, I was starting to see why stakeouts were so difficult. It was exhausting sitting still for so long, watching so carefully and not daring to relax my vigilance. A moment of looking away might mean missing something. Sure, I'd probably hear the security system go off, but I'd prefer to catch them before they got inside. I feared we could be in trouble if they got close to those big crystals. I didn't know if you had to be touching them, but I didn't want to take the chance. If someone with a hypnotism talent and a pocket full of crystals got near that tiara, they could probably con the cops into letting them walk away with it. No, we needed to catch them outside.

But it was really difficult to stay alert. I was just starting to drift off when a vibration on the ground startled me awake. The wail of a train horn told me what that vibration was. Passenger trains hadn't come through here since the fifties, but the occasional freight train came down this line. I could hear the sound from my apartment, but it was a lot louder up close.

The bells on the Main Street crossing gates sounded, and the vibration turned into a rumble as the train came through. I stood and moved toward the museum. The train would be the perfect cover for a burglary. It might make enough noise to drown out the alarm, and most freight trains were so long that they took ages to pass. If I were going to break into the museum, now's when I'd do

it.

Before I made it to the museum, I heard a siren shriek.

It was hard to tell with all the noise from the train, but I thought it sounded like Jordan's alarm, and I was pretty sure it was coming from the museum. I ran that way. As I rounded the corner to the museum entrance, I saw another figure heading toward the museum from another direction. I started to pull up short and look for a place to hide, but it occurred to me that if the siren had sounded, the thief was already in the building.

"Hold it right there!" the figure snapped, and soon I was blinded by a powerful flashlight shining right in my face. I automatically raised my hands, making sure he had no reason to see me as a threat.

"Lex? What are you doing here?" It was Wes's voice. I wasn't sure if it was good or bad that it was him. I supposed it depended on how he took this.

"Same as you, I bet, watching for the thieves. And it looks like I was right that they'd give it a try."

"Stay here," he ordered.

He went up the steps to the museum and tried the door. It was locked. He took a key from his pocket and unlocked the door. The tail end of the freight train passed, and the alarm siren seemed even louder in the relative silence. A steady beep from the museum security system added to the racket. Wes entered the museum and must have disarmed both security systems because the world went quiet once more, though my ears still rang.

A moment later, Wes emerged, shaking his head, and locked the door behind him. "False alarm. The vibrations from the train must have set it off. Jordan'll have to fix that or we're going to have nonstop alarms."

"You'll have to make sure this isn't a 'boy who cried wolf' situation where you quit responding to alarms and the thief takes advantage of that."

"I'm glad you're not a criminal. You're more of a creative

thinker than most of them are.” I couldn’t tell whether he meant that as a compliment.

His phone rang, and he stepped away from me as he answered. I hovered nearby, wondering if I should go back to my stakeout spot. Should I consider his phone call an end to our conversation, or would we resume talking once he was done?

Before I could make up my mind, he ended the call. “Looks like they weren’t planning to hit the museum, after all,” he said grimly. “While I was wasting my time here, they hit my grandmother’s house—and she got home earlier than they expected.”

Chapter Fourteen

I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. It was all my fault. My silly idea about moving the tiara to the museum had diverted police attention away from protecting the targeted neighborhood. I'd even known that Evelyn's brooch was the only one that hadn't yet been stolen, making her a likely target, and I hadn't warned anyone. Wes was already running toward his SUV, and I ran after him. "Is she okay?" I called out.

"I don't know," he replied without looking back. "I also don't know if they took anything. They got away."

"They didn't get her brooch."

He stopped and looked at me. "How do you know?"

"Because I have it. She gave it to me for safekeeping." Well, sort of. We didn't have to get into why she initially gave it to me.

"They didn't know that." He resumed running, and I almost caught up with him.

When we reached his truck, I said, "I'm coming with you."

"This isn't a story, Lex."

"Evelyn may need help and, as we saw the other night, you and your guys are pretty useless when it comes to comforting upset people. I'm going for her, not for a story." But if she wanted to give me an interview, I'd be okay with that.

He made a soft grunting sound, like a growl being cut short, but he unlocked the door, and I opened the door and climbed into the passenger seat before he could change his mind. He used the lights

and siren as we drove to Evelyn's house, and it was rather thrilling, in a weird way. I hadn't ridden in any vehicle with lights and siren going before. We probably reached Evelyn's house in less than a minute. During the drive, Wes called for someone to cover for him at the museum.

Evelyn greeted us at the front door, holding a package of frozen peas. "Are you okay, Gran?" he asked.

"Just a little bump," she said. Her voice sounded strong and steady, which was reassuring.

"Still, you'd better sit down," Wes said, taking her elbow and walking her to the living room. He got her settled on the sofa, and she placed the bag of peas on her knee, which looked a little scuffed, her stockings torn. I took the seat next to her, and he sat in the chair across from her. "Now, tell me what happened."

"I was at choir rehearsal, and the thieves must have come to my house while I was gone. I suppose they heard my car when I came home and were trying to run away before I got inside. We collided on the back steps, and I fell. I banged my knee, and by the time I got up, they were gone."

"By 'they,' do you mean more than one person?"

"There were two. I didn't get a good look at them, but I think they were women, or else really small men."

"Was anything damaged? Is anything missing?" Wes demanded.

"They did something to the back door. Otherwise, I haven't looked and haven't touched anything."

"Good." He stood and said to me, "Stay here with her," before heading back to check the rest of the house.

She reached over and patted my hand. "Thank you for coming. Wes is wonderful for making you feel safe, but he's not much for comfort, and I'm glad to have someone to stay by me right now."

"That must have been frightening, coming home to find someone in your house."

"I didn't get the chance to be frightened. They were gone almost before I knew they were here."

“You may have scared them more than they scared you.”

She grinned. “Oh, I can just imagine how they felt when they heard my car pull up and they were inside my house. I don’t think they meant to hurt me. They were merely trying to get away before I caught them. In fact, when I fell, one of them turned like she was going to help me, and the other dragged her along. I’d guess one was older and one was younger, based on the way they moved.”

“I thought you said you didn’t get a good look.”

“I didn’t. I only got an impression, and I wouldn’t swear to it. It all happened so fast.”

“I feel like it’s at least partially my fault,” I said, wincing. “I had this big idea that the thieves were going to go after the tiara, and I said something about it to Lupe, and so the police got roped into providing security at the museum, so they were more focused on that than on patrolling the neighborhood. I even knew that your brooch seemed to be the last piece involved in the pact that hadn’t yet been stolen. We should have been staking you out.”

“I don’t think one man at the museum made that big a difference,” she reassured me. I doubted Wes agreed. I was pretty certain he blamed me and my big ideas.

He certainly didn’t look friendly when he returned to the living room. “They seem to have broken your back door. It’ll have to be repaired. Maybe you should stay with Mom tonight until we can get that fixed. Otherwise, it doesn’t look like they touched anything. Nothing seems out of order. You must have scared them off before they got far.”

“The choir director let us go early, probably because the sopranos wouldn’t stop squabbling, so I came home earlier than they must have expected,” Evelyn said.

“I’ll get a crime scene team over in the morning to check for prints,” Wes said. “Lexie says she has your brooch.”

“Yes, I thought it would be safest with someone they wouldn’t expect to have it.”

“Then at least they didn’t get what they came for. Maybe this’ll scare them off. Why don’t you go with Lexie and pack an overnight bag, and I’ll call Mom and tell her you’re coming.”

“I don’t think I have to worry about them coming back tonight,” Evelyn said. “As you said, they’re probably terrified.”

“Yes, but I’d like to check for prints, just in case, and that’ll be easier if you haven’t been around the house much. Touch as little as possible and get only what you need for one night.”

I helped Evelyn up and let her lean on my arm as we walked back to her bedroom. “You think those crystals in the tiara might be part of the big one?” she whispered when we were away from the living room.

“Maybe. It was a hunch. But I might have been wrong.”

“Lupe didn’t know anything about it?”

“No. I thought they might have taken the big crystal from the hypnotist’s turban, split it among everyone, and put the biggest remaining pieces in the tiara, with the glass from the tiara going to the turban.”

“That’s an interesting theory.”

“Unfortunately, it hasn’t panned out yet.”

I helped her gather toiletries, a nightgown, and a change of clothes and carried it all out to Wes’s SUV. I sat in the back seat, behind the wire mesh like a criminal, while she sat in front. When we got to Wes’s mother’s house, I stayed outside while Wes took her in. I wondered if this was his childhood home. I couldn’t see much of it in the dark, just that it looked like an all-American white picket fence kind of place, complete with front porch. Wes must not have stuck around for conversation because he was back a minute later.

As he drove toward downtown, he said, “Do you want me to take you home, or are you planning to go back to the museum to continue your stakeout?” His tone told me what he thought about that stakeout.

“I don’t think they’ll try anything else tonight. I doubt we’re

dealing with professional thieves, and running into Evelyn probably gave them the scare of their lives. So, home, please.”

He sighed, releasing pent-up tension. Even in the dark, I could see his shoulders relax. “Thanks for coming with me tonight. It did help Gran to have you there. I don’t think I could have been both cop and good grandson at the same time. If I’d let myself get out of cop mode, I might have done something unprofessional. I still might, if I catch these people. They’re really pissing me off, even if these crimes are minor.”

“Fortunately, she doesn’t seem to have been hurt too badly,” I said.

“And that’s lucky. I hope they’re too scared to try anything else.”

“Yeah, maybe their reign of terror will end.”

“You still think they might go after the tiara?”

“If they’re scared of running into residents, it might be their only option, depending on what they’re really up to and what they really want.”

I thought about telling him what I knew, but when I rehearsed it in my head, it sounded ridiculous, even to me. There was no way to tell him I thought they were stealing crystals to magnify their magical powers. I wondered if Evelyn could talk to him. Would he take her seriously, even if what she said sounded ridiculous? I just wished I knew where he stood on what he believed about the sideshow powers.

MIDWAY THROUGH THE NIGHT, I woke with the fear that the attempted burglary at Evelyn’s house had been a diversion meant to draw the police away from the museum so the thieves could steal the tiara. I got one leg out of bed, with the intention of getting up to resume my stakeout, but I fell back asleep before I could go anywhere. I woke in the morning in an uncomfortable

position with a cold foot. As soon as it was time for the museum to open, I rushed over there to find that there was already a line of people waiting to go in. It seemed to be business as usual, aside from the larger crowd. I couldn't believe people were that eager to see a cheap costume tiara on display. Then again, I was in line with them, so I couldn't judge.

I nearly wilted with relief when I saw the tiara in its display case. It had been bad enough that Evelyn was hurt. I'd have felt terrible if the tiara had also been stolen. But all was well. The tiara was safe and the museum's donation jar was full. People were even looking at other displays in the museum and in the adjacent sideshow collection. My idea was paying off in more ways than one.

"Isn't this exciting?" Lenora said, coming over to me. "We haven't had this many visitors in ages. And the queen candidate selection is today." She raised her hands with her fingers crossed. "I'm really hoping my niece makes it. She's head twirler, and this would be a great way to finish her senior year."

"Good luck to her," I said, wondering if that was the girl Tami had mentioned to me as a likely candidate.

Assured that the tiara was where it belonged, I hurried back to the office. They were announcing the candidates that afternoon at a school assembly, right before the paper was supposed to go to press, so I had to leave a spot for a photo and get everything else ready. Why couldn't they have just sent the news in an e-mail instead of having an event that would require coverage?

As I worked, I found myself thinking. No one had tried to steal the tiara since it was moved. What if they'd given up on that as being too risky? There was another way of getting the tiara: winning it. Then they could swap out the crystals with glass or with other crystals, and no one would be the wiser. If the thieves had some kind of persuasive power, they might be able to use the crystals they'd already stolen to guarantee the right person got nominated and won. The candidates might give me a decent

suspect pool.

But why get the crystals in the first place? There had to be some motive beyond just winning the crown or they wouldn't have made even that one attempt at stealing it. What would they do with that power? That was the real question. All the crystal thefts and whatever they might do to get the tiara were just preparation for the real crime.

"Don't you have a deadline?" Jean's voice startled me out of my thoughts.

"It's almost ready. I only have the candidate announcement later today to cover. I don't know why they wait for Thursday afternoon for that."

"Don't knock it. That's as close as you'll come to getting a scoop in a weekly newspaper."

"They're announcing it at an assembly. Everyone in town will know by the time it's in print, even if that's the next morning."

"An assembly? That's different. They used to send a messenger over with the names so I could break the news."

"Well, someone must have suggested an assembly a few years ago, and then it became part of the tradition. I'm actually kind of glad they're making an announcement because there's a good chance that one of the nominees will be our suspect. If they can't steal the tiara, they'll try to win it, and if I'm right that it's a descendant of the hypnotist behind all this, she'll have stolen enough crystals to sway the vote. Seeing the nominations announced may tell me something."

"You think you'll be able to tell from watching?"

"The reaction of the students to the nominations might tell me who was truly supported and who found themselves voting without realizing why."

The assembly that afternoon was held in the school auditorium in the old part of the school, an Art Deco relic of school architecture. The auditorium was just starting to fill with students when I got there. I noticed that the photographer was down near

the stage, but I stood behind the back row, where I could observe the audience. From what I could tell, the students were being allowed to choose their own seats rather than having to sit with their classes, and that meant the various social groups clustered together. A lot of girls headed straight to the front, perhaps because they hoped to be among the nominees who would have to come up to the stage. The boys mostly sat in the back rows.

Tami came to stand by me, and I felt honored that a teenager was willing to be seen in public with me. Then again, I got the impression that Tami didn't much care what her peers thought about her. "Welcome to this town's attempt to create a caste system," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Are you anticipating any surprises?" I asked.

"Maybe. There was some pretty intense campaigning this morning. Like, passing out doughnuts before school. Kaylee must want it really bad. She even smiled at people."

Teachers herded a few stragglers into the auditorium, and the principal walked onto the stage. He gestured for quiet as he took his place behind a microphone on a stand. The microphone squealed when he attempted to adjust the height, and a teacher ran onstage to help him. While they were situating the microphone, the conversations among the students resumed, and the principal had to call for quiet again. The students were making too much noise to notice him. One of the girls in the front row stood, turned around, and made hushing motions, but the auditorium didn't grow truly quiet until a burly man in shorts and a T-shirt came down the aisle, blew the whistle hanging on a cord around his neck, and bellowed, "Can it!"

"Thank you, Coach," the principal said. "We've come to one of the most anticipated moments of the school year, the announcement of the candidates for Spring Blossom Queen. The student body has submitted the names of the senior girls they think most represent the best of Stirling Mills High School, those who are worthy of the honor of wearing the Spring Blossom Tiara."

“Barf,” muttered Tami.

“The office staff has spent the day tallying nominations, and they’ve determined the four names submitted the most times by our student body. Without further ado, the envelope, please.”

“You know he’s always dreamed of getting to say that,” Tami said.

A teacher walked out and handed him a sealed envelope. He fumbled with the flap and resorted to tearing it open. Then he patted his shirt pocket, looking for his reading glasses, before remembering that they were on his forehead. He lowered them and squinted at the card inside the envelope. “Your Spring Blossom Queen nominees are: Kylie Kennedy.” There was a decent level of applause, along with a few whoops, as a tiny blonde jumped out of her seat in the front row, turned to wave to the audience, then bounced her way up the steps at the side of the stage to stand behind the principal. She waved again, beaming the whole time.

“Latisha Robinson.” That announcement was followed by a roar among the boys grouped in the back of the auditorium and loud applause from throughout the student body. A tall girl unfolded herself from a seat just in front of where the boys had congregated and jogged down the aisle. Even in gym clothes, she had an easy elegance about her. When she came onstage, she towered over Kylie, who enthusiastically hugged her.

“Kaylee Crocker.” The group in the front of the auditorium squealed. There was a smattering of applause from the other students, along with some soft boos. For a moment, I thought she must be absent, but finally a girl stood from the front row and slowly made her way to the stage, moving as though this whole thing was an ordeal she was expected to endure. I recognized her as the girl who’d been introduced at the Civic League lunch as the town’s representative to another festival. She was the least peppy cheerleader I’d ever seen, showing nothing of the charm she’d displayed at the lunch. She’d been on Tami’s list of likely candidates, but it didn’t sound like the students were at all

enthusiastic about her.

“And the final nominee is Candy Parker.” That was followed by dead silence for a moment, followed by polite applause as a girl sitting near the back stood and came down the side aisle. I heard a loud whoop of triumph from the doorway and turned to see Ashley Parker standing there, pumping her fist in triumph. Candy’s shoulders hunched and her head ducked as though she wished she could vanish.

“Huh. That’s interesting,” Tami said.

“You weren’t expecting that?”

“Not really. I guess people like her okay, but she’s not at all popular. Must be the sympathy vote after everything she went through this year with her dad and all.”

“It speaks well of the students that you’re not holding it against her.”

“Nah, I think everyone knows that she was probably switched at birth because she’s nothing like her parents, and they know her mom gives her a hard time for not being more like her.”

There was something familiar about Candy. I’d seen her somewhere before, I was sure, though I knew I hadn’t interviewed her for the newspaper. The Civic League lunch, I realized. That was it. She’d been the Student of the Month. I hadn’t made the connection between her last name and her parents.

Up on the stage, Latisha and Kylie greeted Candy warmly with hugs. Candy stiffened at first before returning the hugs. Kaylee turned her back so she would be impossible to hug.

“And there we have our queen nominees,” the principal said.

I wasn’t sure the identity of the candidates gave me a clear-cut suspect. Latisha and Kylie seemed to be genuinely popular, and their behavior suggested they’d earned that popularity. Kaylee didn’t seem to be all that well liked, but Tami had said she was a likely nominee. She was the kind of popular girl everyone hates, which is all too common in high school. Was she the typical queen bee, or was she using supernatural powers to earn honors in spite

of not being well liked? And then there was Candy, who wasn't on anyone's list. She was the only one whose circumstances I knew anything about. I'd seen a notice that the court date for her father's embezzlement trial had been set. That would certainly be a reason for wanting to be able to control people. Or maybe the student body was cheering on an underdog.

Interviewing the candidates for the newspaper would give me a chance to figure out which one was behind the thefts.

Chapter Fifteen

Charlene began work the following morning. I got her set up on her computer and gave her a quick rundown of life in the office before I headed to the school to interview the queen candidates. “I hate to skip out on you on your first day, but this is exactly why I needed you,” I told her as I got ready to leave. “Normally, Fridays are light, but this was when the school was willing to let the candidates out of class so I could talk to them.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine,” she said, waving me toward the door. “I know how to answer the phone. And say hello to my granddaughter for me.”

“I wondered if Latisha was related to you. You must be so proud of her.”

“I am. But not for this silly queen business. She’s a good kid—a brilliant athlete, a scholar, and she’s nice.”

Although my school had never had anything quite like this, as I waited in the library for the interviews I found myself recalling my high school newspaper days, when I often had to interview students far more popular than I was. I reminded myself that I was all grown up now. I wasn’t the nerdy newspaper girl interviewing people who didn’t know I existed. I was a nerdy newspaper *adult* interviewing people who didn’t know I existed. And, I hoped, I’d figure out who my chief suspect was. I’d worn Evelyn’s brooch so I could see the girls’ reaction to it. It was the one piece other than the tiara that the thief was missing.

Latisha was my first interview. She had the bone structure and height of a fashion model and moved with the grace of a dancer. Her smile when she greeted me was genuine. “Miss Lincoln, thank you for coming to talk to me. My grandmother’s really looking forward to working with you.”

“I’m afraid I’ve already put her to work running the office while I’m here,” I said before launching into my questions about Latisha’s activities at school, which were numerous. She wasn’t just a star athlete. She was into everything, and with great enthusiasm. She already had a basketball scholarship and had her eyes set on medical school.

In spite of all that, she was rather self-effacing about this honor. “I’m just the jock nominee,” she said with a casual shrug. “They were rebelling against the usual gang who gets nominated for this sort of thing and decided to throw all their votes to me. The nerds did the same thing with Candy—and I’m saying that as one of them. It’s about time the student body recognized girls for something other than standing on the sidelines of a football field. Not to go all ‘not like other girls’ and denigrate feminine pursuits. I just don’t think any one group should have a monopoly on recognition, the way it has been for a long time.” But probably not always. I didn’t imagine Jean had been a cheerleader. If they even had cheerleaders back then.

“There was a campaign for Candy?” I asked. That would explain a lot—and make the picture fuzzier.

“I think so. The computer club and yearbook staff were really pushing her on voting day. I’m glad to see them getting involved like that. Their members deserve the spotlight, too.”

I understood Latisha’s position on cheerleaders when Kaylee showed up and acted like she was doing me a huge favor by deigning to let me interview her. I couldn’t tell that she reacted to the brooch, but then she didn’t react to much of anything. I could probably have stripped to my underwear during the interview without her noticing. She lived in a universe of one. She was a

difficult interview, giving one-word answers and not having much of substance to say. It took all my journalistic skill to get enough information from her to be able to write a paragraph about her.

If she had an uncanny gift that made her inexplicably popular, it wasn't working on me, but she probably wasn't trying too hard to win me over, since I couldn't vote. Could she be one of the thieves, trying to enhance her ability, possibly to win this crown? "What did you do for spring break?" I asked her.

"Why?" she asked with a glare.

"Just trying to get a picture of who you are as a person, what you like to do." *Since you don't seem to have any actual interests*, I finished mentally.

"I spent the week in Cabo, starting my base tan." That took her out of the running for the thefts that had happened during spring break, but an accomplice could have handled those.

"What are your plans for after graduation?" I asked, trying to figure out a possible motive.

"My mom and I are going to Europe. And if I win this contest, it makes me eligible to compete in the state Queen Royale pageant. You have to have won a local title within the past six months. It's not a big title, but it's good practice for when I make a run for Miss Texas in a couple of years." She sounded a lot more animated than at any other point in the interview, so I asked her a few more questions about her pageant career. That seemed to be her hobby, and she'd been competing since she was a toddler. I found it hard to believe, since it was so far from my personal interests and experience, but that could make for a motive. She might have been stealing crystals to be able to win the tiara that then might give her the power to win other pageants. She was definitely on my mental suspect list.

Kylie, the twirler, bounced into the library and shook my hand enthusiastically. "Hi! Thank you so much for interviewing me. This is such an honor. I'm so excited," she said. "Getting nominated was the most awesome thing that's ever happened to me. Well, maybe

other than being homecoming queen. That was really great, too.”

She was that enthusiastic about everything, whether talking about school, twirling, her friends, or her future plans. By the time I was through talking to her, *I* wanted to vote for her. I had to shake my head to clear the haze once she was gone. Had she put a whammy on me? I hadn’t felt compelled to do anything, but I’d certainly been under her spell. I made a mental note to investigate her a little more. Unfortunately, I hadn’t thought to ask her what she’d done for spring break during the interview. It hadn’t seemed relevant then while she was talking about all her volunteer work and her plans to spend the summer on a mission trip before going to college to study international business. Maybe that had been what she was up to, keeping me from asking her any questions that might reveal her activities or her motives. I didn’t even recall whether or not she’d reacted to the brooch. She’d maintained eye contact with me the whole time.

Candy Parker looked a lot like her mother had in high school, though less “done.” Her hair was pulled into a simple ponytail rather than styled, and she wore no makeup other than maybe some lip balm. That gave her a wholesome, girl-next-door look. She had the kind of skin and hair that didn’t need a lot of help. I wouldn’t have classed her as a nerd. She seemed like a fairly ordinary teen to me. “This is so embarrassing,” she said, rolling her eyes. “It was supposed to be a joke to subvert the system and point out the hypocrisy, and it got out of control. No one actually thought I’d end up nominated. I guess there are more nerds and outsiders than there are insiders. My mom’s delirious with joy, though. She’d given up all hope of me living up to her standards.”

“I’m sure that’s a lot of pressure,” I said. “But you’re doing your own thing. What activities are you into?”

“Nothing much. Mostly I study. I’m in the honor society and the band, but that’s about it. I do my volunteer work through the church. Or I did.” She winced. “I’m sure you’ve heard about that, since you’re the newspaper editor.”

“Yeah. It must be rough.” I angled myself to make sure the brooch was visible. I thought her eyes flicked toward it a few times as we talked, but I didn’t notice much of a reaction.

“It sucks. Not that I was surprised. My dad’s kind of a creep, but it’s been hard on us. We had to move in with my grandma.” She gave a worried frown. “You’re not going to put that in the newspaper, are you?”

“No, don’t worry. It’ll just be the superficial stuff.”

“Oh, good. Because my mom would kill me. I think she wants to get back together with him, which I don’t get at all. I never want to speak to him again.” She flinched and said, “Um . . .”

“Don’t worry, that’s not going in the paper, either.”

She let out a huge sigh. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. Not very queen-like, huh?”

“Totally understandable. I imagine you’ve got a lot of stuff you’ve been holding in for a while.”

“Oh yeah. And I’m not sure this whole thing is going to help. I mean, it was great that people thought about me to nominate me, and all, but I’m afraid it’s just going to draw more attention to everything going on with my family.” As she spoke, she looked down at the invisible patterns she was drawing on the leg of her jeans with her finger.

She had a point, and it made me rethink her place on my suspect list. It didn’t sound like she cared about her father getting cleared of charges or back with her mother, which had been my guesses at her motives for wanting to be able to influence people, and getting herself on the candidate slate would mean extra scrutiny. I’d gone in to these interviews fairly certain she was my prime suspect, but now I didn’t want her to be. I felt sorry for her. Out of all the candidates, she was the one most like I’d been at that age. She was the one I’d have been most likely to be friends with.

But I had to be objective about this. As I worked on the article later that afternoon, I considered each candidate as a potential suspect. I didn’t think Latisha was on the list at all, and not just

because I liked her grandmother. I couldn't think of a single motive. I was fairly certain she wouldn't have needed supernatural help to get nominated. She was friendly, kind, smart, and had athletic ability. A search through the archives came up with dozens of articles about honors she'd won. She already had a college scholarship. There was nothing for her to gain from stealing crystals to amplify a power, and she had a lot to lose. If she got caught breaking into houses, she could lose that scholarship.

Kaylee seemed more likely to me. She needed to win this crown to compete for a bigger prize, and I found it suspicious that she kept getting elected to things based on popularity in spite of being cold and surly. Had she been using uncanny abilities to manipulate people into voting for her? The archives showed that she'd been involved in pageants since she was a child. If there was a title involving a crown and a sash, she'd made a run at it, and she'd won a few. I almost didn't recognize her in some of the photos, since she was actually smiling and looked like she meant it. The Spring Blossom crown would not only get her into that next pageant, but the crystals would possibly allow her to make sure she won it. I did a general Internet search on her and found a couple of videos of the cheerleading squad on the sidelines. I could immediately tell which of the cheerleaders were from the acrobat family. There were some truly impressive stunts. Then there was Kaylee, halfheartedly clapping her hands. I wondered how the cheerleaders were selected. Was it strictly a judged tryout, or was there some kind of popular vote? Unless she showed a lot more life in tryouts, I couldn't imagine Kaylee being chosen by a panel of experts. If there was popularity involved, I still didn't get it. The persuasion power would explain a lot. On the other hand, she'd supposedly been out of town during some of the burglaries.

Kylie struck me as being like Latisha, not needing supernatural help—unless it was magic making her that magnetic in the first place. The archives showed that she'd been popular since junior high. She was involved in a lot of clubs at school, along with

church activities. In every photo, whether she was at the head of the marching band or doing home repairs with the church youth group, she had the same bright smile. The videos I found of her twirling were eye-popping. The acrobat talent had to have a supernatural component. I couldn't think of what her motive for getting the power-enhancing crystals might be. If she'd been using powers all along, she'd been doing really well. There wasn't much need to enhance them. Would she need to get even more agile after high school?

Then there was Candy. Her being nominated was unexpected, which would fit with someone who'd recently enhanced her persuasive powers. Then again, Latisha's explanation for that also made sense, so maybe it really was a case of the underdogs uniting. I'd thought she might want to use her powers to help her father, but she didn't want anything to do with him. I couldn't find much about her in the archives or on the Internet, just a couple of pictures of her at church and school activities, usually in the background. Her mother was another story. She was all over everything up until the story about her husband came out. Could she be the thief, with Candy as unwilling accomplice?

That brought up the question of who the partner or accomplice might be for the other girls. I looked up their families. Kaylee seemed to be in the same boat as Candy, except with a sister who was queen of everything instead of a mother. Kaylee's sister had been homecoming queen, prom queen, Spring Blossom Queen, and Christmas queen, in addition to winning all the same pageant titles Kaylee had. She was currently up for Miss Texas, aiming to be Miss America. That might be a motive. Were the sisters in it together? I wondered if the older sister had gone with the family to Cabo for spring break. If she'd been in town, she could have handled those thefts.

The Robinson clan was quite large, and quite accomplished. If Latisha was the culprit, there were a lot of options for accomplices. She had a wealth of cousins. I just couldn't think of any reason

why any of them would be after those crystals. Kylie was from the family of acrobats and was a niece of Lenora from the museum. That probably explained her twirling abilities. I couldn't find much reason for anyone in her family to want to either enhance their agility power or be able to persuade people.

Kylie was too small and Latisha too tall to have been the person who'd dropped the jewelry box. I suspected Latisha could have outrun me more easily, and Kylie could have pulled off some elaborate parkour moves to get away from me. That person could have been the accomplice, though, so I didn't think I could rule either of them out on that basis. Both Candy and Kaylee had been at the Civic League luncheon while Marybeth's house was being broken into. Did that clear them, or did it mean they'd alerted their accomplice that their target wasn't at home?

I leaned back in my chair with a sigh. I'd been sure the thief would be among the queen candidates and it would be easy to narrow the field to the culprit after I talked to them, but the picture was just as muddy as ever. "Something wrong?" Charlene asked.

I blinked back to the present as I looked across the office. I was so used to being alone, aside from Jean, that I'd forgotten she was there. "Just working on this story about the queen candidates and trying to get it right."

"Don't worry too much about it. We expect it's pretty much the same every year. I could probably recite it from memory. All you have to do is change the names."

"Do the same kinds of girls tend to get nominated every year?"

"Most definitely. There's usually a twirler, a cheerleader, an athlete, and a brain."

"Sounds like the cast of a teen movie. And then they all get to know each other and become friends when they're forced to work together on something."

"I don't think I'd count on that happening," she said dryly. "And a cheerleader or twirler always wins."

If I was right about the thief being among the queen candidates, the thief would now know that I had Evelyn's brooch. What happened next might help me pinpoint the culprit. When I got ready to head to Margarita's for dinner that night, I decided to set a trap.

"Jean?" I called out.

She appeared in the middle of the apartment. "I thought we agreed you weren't going to summon me."

"I was inviting you, not summoning you. And it's important. Could you watch my apartment while I go out to dinner? I think there's a chance the thief might hit it."

"What do you expect me to do about it? Most people can't see me."

"You can't blow things around or make it feel really cold?"

"Only with a lot of effort. And that doesn't accomplish much."

"The main thing I want you to do is get a look at anyone who breaks in, if they do. Scaring them is a bonus."

"You really think they'll hit you? Do they even know you're investigating?"

"There's a chance they know I have Evelyn's brooch, and that's the last crystal other than the tiara."

"Okay, I'll keep an eye out, but I can't promise to be able to tell you who they are. I won't recognize most of the people alive now unless they've been in the newspaper."

"Most of my suspects have been in the newspaper, and there's also a photo shoot with them tomorrow, so I'll have pictures."

She vanished, and I removed the brooch and hid it in my purse before I went out. If anyone saw me at Margarita's, I wanted them to think I'd left the brooch behind.

Chapter Sixteen

The dinner crowd was in full swing when I got to Margarita's. Almost every table was full, and just about every face at all those tables turned toward me as soon as I entered. I started to brighten at the idea of being welcomed, but then I realized that their expressions weren't friendly. I felt judged. But it wasn't just me. The vibe was hostile, in general. Instead of making the rounds to visit with friends and neighbors, people kept to their own tables, viewing everyone else as though they might be suspects.

In total contrast to the suspicious atmosphere, Kylie waved and gestured for me to come over to her table in the middle of the room, where she introduced me to her parents. They were just as bubbly and enthusiastic as she was. Her father jumped out of his seat to shake my hand, and her mother hugged me like I was a long-lost friend. "It's so good to meet you," her mother said when she released me. "Thank you for interviewing our Kylie. We're so proud of her."

"She seems like a great kid," I said.

"Are you here alone?" her father asked. "Please, join us. We have room."

I wasn't sure I could eat under the onslaught of niceness, and I didn't think I could properly keep an eye on any other potential suspects if I had to socialize, so I said, "Thank you so much for inviting me, but I already made plans with Margarita." I glanced toward the bar, where Margarita waved at me.

“Some other time,” Mr. Kennedy said.

“Any time you see us,” Mrs. Kennedy added. “We just love what you’re doing with the paper.”

I felt a little dizzy as I made my way to my usual seat at the bar. Was that some kind of magical hypnosis whammy, or were they merely so friendly that it was overwhelming? I hadn’t even thought to pay attention to whether or not they reacted to seeing that I wasn’t wearing the brooch. As I took my seat at the bar, I glanced over to their table, and none of them had pulled out a phone to text or call an accomplice.

“Long week?” Margarita asked as she placed a glass of ice water in front of me.

“How many years ago was last Monday?” It seemed like a lifetime ago when I’d been preparing to visit the cemetery.

After I placed my order, I glanced around the restaurant. I hadn’t noticed them at first, but Kaylee and people I presumed were her parents were seated in the corner booth. Kaylee was slouched into her seat, her eyes on her phone and her thumbs flying over the screen. I didn’t have a good view of her mother, but she didn’t look like the stereotypical pageant mom. I couldn’t tell if Kaylee had noticed me, so I had no idea if she was texting her accomplice to have her steal Evelyn’s brooch from my apartment.

Ashley Parker was in another booth, but with her husband, not her daughter. I found that a bit odd. Her daughter got a big honor that she supposedly was ecstatic about, but she wasn’t celebrating with her daughter? I supposed she might have done the celebrating on the night of the announcement, and from the way Candy had talked, she might have declined the chance to have dinner with her father. I couldn’t help but feel bad for Candy that her mother seemed to be prioritizing the husband who’d cheated on her and upended her life over her daughter.

I was so busy watching the Parkers that I didn’t notice that Wes had entered the restaurant and taken the seat beside me until he said, “Fancy meeting you here.”

I jumped, startled, and gave a guilty flinch. Then I wondered why I should feel so guilty. I was merely observing people in a public place. “We’ve got to stop meeting like this,” I quipped in response. “And I suppose we’ll meet again tomorrow morning at that photo shoot at the museum with the queen candidates.”

“Fortunately, the chief’s handling security on that event,” Wes said. “I’m not sure what security is needed for an old carnival prop, unless they think the annual prank is going to break out while people are standing there and watching. I think he’s only going so he can get his picture in the newspaper.”

“I’ll have him cropped out,” I assured him. I frowned as I noticed the dark circles under his eyes. “I hope that means you can get some rest. Rough week?”

“Lots of calls. I’m glad people are reporting suspicious behavior. But they’re reporting everything, and none of it has panned out. People get mad at me for questioning them about being in their own neighborhood, and I’m pretty sure there’s some retaliation going on, with them calling about the people they think reported them. This is the dumbest, most petty case I’ve ever dealt with, and it’s tearing the town apart more than any killing ever has. Fortunately, there hasn’t been one of those.” He rapped his knuckles against the top of the bar, and I couldn’t blame him for observing the superstition of knocking on wood. He probably needed all the help he could get right now.

His phone rang, and when he answered, the blood drained from his face. I know that’s a cliché, but that’s exactly what happened. Even his lips went white. “I’ll be right there,” he said. He was already getting off the barstool as he ended the call and turned to Margarita.

“Go,” she said. “You can pay me later.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“You don’t react like that for nothing. Personal or professional?”

“It’s police business.”

“Okay, then.” I slid off my stool.

He held out a hand like he was stopping traffic and shook his head. “No. Stay here.”

“It’s my job to cover any event serious enough to have you running off like that.”

“But I don’t have to bring you along with me.” He left the restaurant, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to catch him before he got to his SUV.

“I need to get a police scanner,” I said to Margarita, who was boxing up Wes’s meal. “I wonder what’s going on. That looked serious.”

“Call dispatch and find out,” she suggested.

“You think they’d tell me?”

“It’s worth a shot.”

I looked up the non-emergency number and got the motherly voice that answered the phone at the police station. “Hey, Marge,” I said to her. “It’s Lexie Lincoln, from the newspaper. Wes just tore out of Margarita’s like his hair was on fire. Do you know what’s up?”

“You’re not going to believe this, but there was a shooting on Locust.”

I couldn’t help but gasp. “A shooting?”

“No one’s hurt. But a package got delivered to the wrong house. The neighbor was dropping it off at the right house, and I guess the person thought it was an intruder on the porch and shot through the door. At least, that’s the gist I got when they called it in, and I got it from both sides, the person who thought there was an intruder and the person who got shot at.”

“Oh no!” I said. The fears from that crime watch meeting that someone might get shot hadn’t been unfounded, it seemed. When I got off the phone, I told Margarita what I’d learned. “I don’t know if there’s anything to cover. And it’ll be old news before the next issue, but still, it is news, and it might serve as a warning,” I said.

“Go on,” she said. “You can pay me later. I know where to find you.” I was almost done with my meal, and I grabbed one more bite before leaving.

I ran over to Locust Street because it was only a few blocks away and that was faster than going back for my car. It was easy enough to find because of all the police cars and flashing lights. Neighbors had gathered around the perimeter, and I joined them, trying to blend in, since I knew Wes would be mad I’d followed him. I took a few pictures of the scene with my phone, though there really wasn’t a lot going on, just one group of officers on the porch of the house, surrounding a person sitting on the steps, and another group surrounding someone sitting on the curb.

I knew I wouldn’t get anything out of Wes tonight, so I left. I could get an official statement later. This just made it more important to solve the thefts. Until the thieves were caught, the suspicion in the town would only continue to fester, getting worse and worse. I wanted the friendly town I’d come to love back.

The best way to achieve that goal was to see what had happened at my place. Had anyone taken the bait? I’d been distracted by the sudden crisis, so I hadn’t noticed if any of my suspects other than Kaylee had called or texted anyone. Kaylee hadn’t put down her phone.

My pulse sped up as I approached the rear stairs to my apartment. When I reached the landing, I couldn’t see anything obviously wrong. The door was closed, the little window on the door hadn’t been broken, and I didn’t see any scratches or gouges around the lock or the doorknob. My spirits sank, and then I realized that it was pretty weird to be disappointed that my home *hadn’t* been broken into.

I unlocked the door and eased it open to find Jean lounging on the sofa in satin pajamas. “It looks like nothing happened,” I said.

She stretched and sat up. “Someone did jiggle the doorknob, like they were trying to see if the door was locked. They didn’t knock.”

“Did you get a look?”

“By the time I got to the door, they were gone. Even I can’t move instantly through physical space.”

“Did you follow them?”

“I’m tied to this building, remember.”

“I’ve talked to at least one ghost on the front porch. Surely you could have gone out to the landing.”

“I went as far as I could, and I only saw the back of someone’s head in one of those sweatshirts with a hood pulled up. I’m pretty sure it was a girl, but that’s all I can tell you.”

“What kind of girl? Tall, short, skinny, muscular?”

“Pretty average, I’d say.”

Just like the person who’d returned the jewelry, which meant either Kaylee or Candy. But then there were the potential accomplices, and I knew nothing about them. So much for this plan. I sighed. “Oh well, it was worth a shot. Thanks for the help.”

“It was nice hanging out in my old place again.”

Since my home hadn’t been burglarized, I couldn’t call Wes to get fingerprints from the doorknob. Touching a doorknob wasn’t a crime. But, I realized, I had verified that the thieves were connected to the queen nominees. Those were the only people who’d seen me wearing Evelyn’s brooch, and anyone who’d actually wanted to visit me would have knocked instead of trying to open the door.

Now I had to narrow it down further.

WHEN I ARRIVED at the museum the next morning, I was surprised to see Wes standing in front, in uniform. “I thought your boss was handling this. Did he hear about my plan to crop him out of the photos?” I teased as I approached him. I figured it was best to pretend I didn’t know what had happened the night before, since he’d told me to stay out of it.

"I don't know. I just got a cryptic call this morning telling me to handle it. Any guesses I might make about the reason would probably involve aspersions on his character." I could hear the sarcasm lurking behind his deadpan tone.

"Don't worry, I'll crop you out, too."

"I would appreciate that." He actually sounded sincere.

"You aren't anticipating any excitement, are you? Could that be why the chief skipped out?"

"I have considered that, but no one at the station had heard scuttlebutt. My main worry is that this event offers the best opportunity for carrying out the traditional prank. I'd rather not have to tackle a teenager for trying to steal a cheap costume crown."

I felt a bit guilty knowing that the crown actually might be pretty valuable, but I still hadn't figured out a way to tell him what I knew and how I knew it. That would be a good way to get myself locked up for psychiatric observation. It didn't sound like his grandmother had told him anything, which meant he might not be receptive.

"That would make for a really exciting front page," I said, to which he merely grunted. "It doesn't seem like anyone's tried to steal the tiara from the museum," I commented, fishing for information.

"The alarm hasn't gone off other than that one time. They adjusted the sensitivity, but it still works, and the tiara is still there. We may have to put the tiara here in the future, though I did enjoy seeing how creative the kids got. My favorite was the year they dressed up a pig as queen and paraded it through town."

"That would probably make for more interesting photos than we'll get today." I thought that gave me a good lead-in to ask, "So, what was up last night?"

"Just some foolishness out of paranoia. A guy shot at a neighbor who was dropping off a package that had been delivered to the wrong address, and that gave them both a good scare. No

one was hurt, so it's not really news."

"Actually, it sounds like a good object lesson. Maybe it should be in the paper to warn others to think before they shoot."

He sighed. "Maybe. We're just lucky this isn't zucchini season. We'd have a bloodbath from people dropping off surplus zucchini with their neighbors—and it would be hard to tell whether they thought they were shooting thieves or they were trying to fend off the zucchini."

I knew it hadn't been too bad if he was able to make jokes about it. But I did worry that things would only get worse if we didn't clear this up.

The queen candidates and their families soon began arriving. Latisha was first, with her entire family. Charlene radiated pride. A man I assumed was Charlene's husband was at her side, beaming enough to light up the town. Latisha's father was a younger copy of his father, and her mother seemed to be where she got her height. She was nearly a head taller than everyone else present. She might even have topped Wes by an inch or two. Latisha was more dressed up than she'd been when I'd interviewed her, and her masses of tightly coiled curls hung around her shoulders instead of being up in a ponytail. She greeted me like an old friend, and Charlene gave me a hug. "Have you met my husband, Royce?" she said. "Royce, this is Lexie, my new boss."

"Nice to meet you," I said, shaking his hand. "Charlene has been a huge help already."

"You're the one doing me a favor by getting her out from under my feet," he joked.

"Oh, you," she said, swatting him lightly on the arm. "We both know you were the one getting under my feet."

Kylie and her parents showed up soon afterward. They were all just as bubbly in the morning as they'd been in the evening, greeting everyone present. Even Wes seemed to soften a little under their onslaught of friendliness. "They seem nice," I remarked once they'd entered the museum.

“They are. They really are,” he said, sounding like he was amazed by that.

Kaylee’s family arrived in a top-of-the-line Mercedes, and I started to get an inkling of why she was so popular in spite of being so surly. Her father glad-handed the local dignitaries who were present but ignored Wes and me on his way into the museum. Kaylee and her mother acted like we were invisible.

Candy and her mother were the last to arrive, five minutes after the appointed time. Candy’s eyes looked puffy, like she’d been crying, and her mother was in full mother hen mode, fussing around her, dabbing concealer and powder on her even as Candy hurried into the museum, her head down and shoulders hunched. “Hold still!” Ashley scolded. “You’re about to get your picture taken. Do you want to look like death?”

I thought she actually looked a lot like a corpse in an open-casket funeral, with makeup caked on. It was a big change from the way I’d seen her at the school. Her hair had been curled and teased into a Texas beauty pageant bouffant, and her expression suggested that she wasn’t happy about it at all. If she hadn’t been one of the queen candidates I was expecting, and if her mother hadn’t been with her, I wouldn’t have recognized her.

Once everyone was present, Wes and I entered the museum. It was crowded with all the queen nominees and their families, as well as the city council, chamber of commerce people, and school board members who were still trickling in. The mayor made a few opening remarks that I jotted down, then he gestured for Wes to come unlock the case. It might have been my imagination, but I thought Wes swayed slightly when the case opened. He was frowning and shaking his head when he returned to where I stood near the door.

“This probably isn’t what you expected of your law enforcement career,” I whispered to him as the photographer wrangled the queen nominees into position.

“I grew up here. I knew what I was getting into,” he said, but

he sounded distracted, and his focus was on the tiara. I supposed it was at its most vulnerable.

Candy tried to shrug her still fussing mother off as she stepped forward, but her mother persisted, lingering to adjust her daughter's hair and makeup even after the photographer had arranged the nominees around the display case. He had to put his hands on Ashley's shoulders and physically move her out of the shot. I got the impression that Ashley would have preferred to be the one in the picture. "Smile, honey!" she called out, which only deepened Candy's glower. "You can't expect people to vote for such a grump!" Ashley snapped, and Candy obliged with a plastic smile that didn't touch any other part of her face. Even her mouth wasn't fully committed, since her lower lip wobbled.

The other girls were more into it. Kylie was always cheerful, but the moment the camera came out, it was like someone flipped a switch and Kaylee suddenly gave a brilliant smile. Latisha smiled fairly naturally, as though she just happened to be hanging out with her friends next to a display case with a tacky tiara in it. The photographer took a bunch of shots, including some silly ones, and soon even Candy had relaxed into it and looked a bit more natural. Well, aside from her hair and makeup. I didn't think that look had been in style since maybe 1990. Her mother hadn't done her any favors.

While the photographer worked, Kaylee's father cleared his throat and said, "I'd like to take this occasion to announce that Crocker Imports will provide the cars for the queen candidates to ride in the parade." There was a polite round of applause from the dignitaries. I got the impression this wasn't a surprise announcement or a break in tradition, but it further solidified my suspicions about Kaylee's popularity. I wondered what kind of car she drove to school.

While I watched the photo shoot, I assessed my suspects again. Kylie was magnetic enough that either she was already putting the whammy on everyone or didn't need to do so. Kaylee had a motive

for winning the crown, but her popularity made a bit more sense now. I still hadn't thought of a possible motive for Latisha.

That left Candy. Ashley had been popular, in spite of not having a great personality, as far as I could tell. Had she, knowingly or not, been influencing people all that time? With Andy Parker's trial coming up, she had good reason to want extra influence. Someone with an influence talent showing up at court with all the crystals might be able to sway a jury.

She might even be able to get her husband back, which she seemed to want, and keep him under her spell. The final piece in the plan was her daughter winning the tiara, and she had a chance at it, in spite of being an unexpected candidate. It all fit. The problem was, I had zero evidence. I just had a good theory that was based on information I got from dead people. How could I possibly talk to Wes about this without sounding like I was completely off my rocker?

I decided that I'd just have to chance it. He might not take me seriously once he learned I thought I could hear ghosts, but he'd never solve this case without full information, so I owed it to him to tell him what I knew. If I was right about the Parkers, this had gone beyond stealing cheap costume jewelry and might involve perverting the justice system.

I waited until the photo shoot ended and the candidates and their families were leaving before I approached Wes. He was already frowning intensely, which made me second-guess my plan. This might not be the best time. But there probably wasn't going to be a good time. I steeled myself for his likely reaction and opened my mouth to speak.

Before I could say anything, he said, "I think one of the queen candidates is the thief."

Chapter Seventeen

That took me aback. I thought *I* was going to say that. I recovered in time to play it cool and say, “Um, yeah. Took you long enough. What clued you in?”

He flinched, as though he’d just realized he’d spoken aloud. Then he frowned. “How do *you* know?”

I glanced around at the photo session still in progress. “We need to talk, but not here.”

“No, not here.” I was surprised by how heartfelt his response was.

Now I was curious what he knew and how he’d learned it, but I had to get through the rest of the event. I was sure my photographer already had all the shots I could possibly need, but since my presence was mostly about community relations, I didn’t think I could duck out, and Wes wouldn’t be able to leave until the tiara was safely locked up once more. I had to stand there and die of curiosity while the photographers for the school newspaper and yearbook took individual shots of each candidate with the tiara, then the family members rushed in to take their own pictures.

I couldn’t help but marvel at how Kaylee instinctively sensed when a camera was pointed at her. Instantly, her entire demeanor changed. Her posture straightened, her scowl turned into a smile, and even her eyes lit up. What was truly remarkable was that it wasn’t just when she was posing for pictures. She somehow knew when she might be in the background of someone else’s picture

and perked up. I couldn't help but wonder if that was some kind of sideshow talent. Was she descended from a peep show performer who always knew when she was being watched? And was this talent being amped up by proximity to the tiara?

When the photographers shot Candy's solo pictures, she looked so miserable that my heart went out to her. The whole time, her mother criticized the way she stood, her pose, her smile, where she put her hands, and anything else she could think of. The puffy hairdo was already wilting, going flat in a way that I suspected matched Candy's spirits. If they were the thieves, I felt certain that Candy was being coerced by her mother. From what she'd said in my interview with her, Candy didn't care about her father possibly going to prison. If that was the reason they were gathering the crystals, I couldn't imagine Candy cooperating willingly.

That made me wonder again what Wes knew and how he'd learned it. I glanced over to where he stood at the far end of the museum, by the front door. It was hard to tell whether he was guarding the exit or staying as far as possible from the action. Maybe both.

The photo shoot took forever. I wanted to charge over and tell the student photographers to get their shots and get it over with, but I suspected that browbeating teenagers wouldn't be good for my standing in the community.

Finally, they were done and Wes locked the display case. The Robinsons and the Kennedys lingered, chatting, but I figured my work was done. I headed out with Wes. "So, want to go grab a doughnut or something at the diner and talk about this case?" I said.

He glanced around furtively. "Let's go somewhere we can talk privately."

Oh, so this wasn't even a booth at the diner conversation. I was even more intrigued. "My place?" At least, I thought it might be private if Jean kept to herself. She seemed to be holding to our agreement to stay in the office and not bother me at home without

being invited, unless she had ways of lurking without me seeing her.

“Okay.” He headed to his SUV, and I joined him. I’d walked the few blocks from my office, and I thought it was safe to assume he’d offer me a ride, since we were going to the same place. He unlocked the passenger door without saying anything, validating my assumption. We didn’t talk in the brief time it took him to drive to the newspaper building.

Up in my apartment, I automatically went to the kitchen and put a kettle on. This seemed like a conversation that would require tea. “I guess you’re still getting settled in,” he remarked, looking around the living room, which was crowded with moving boxes.

“It’s a little challenging moving into a fully furnished place when I already have my own stuff. Some of it may have to go in the office.”

“I’ve got some storage space if there’s anything in here you want to move out. I don’t think anyone would mind you making the apartment a little more your own. It is a bit dated.”

“I think it’s come back around to ‘retro,’” I replied, hoping Jean wasn’t eavesdropping and didn’t take offense at her decor being called “dated.” She was fond of talking about how long she’d been dead, so surely she knew that Art Deco wasn’t the latest trend. I happened to like it. It was like living in an old movie.

The small talk about my apartment decor felt strained and stilted, given that I suspected we were both about to confess something big. I definitely was, and I didn’t think he’d have been concerned about privacy if he merely wanted to tell me the steps in his deductive reasoning that led him to his conclusion.

Finally, the tea was ready, and we sat down in the living room. I decided to start. “I think I know why the jewelry is being stolen and why the tiara’s a target. The crystals amplify abilities—uncanny ones. They were once one bigger crystal that was apparently dangerous or used for harm, and the troupe broke it up and shared it among themselves. They seem to have stuck it in

jewelry, with the biggest pieces going in that tiara. My guess is that the crystal was once in the turban the hypnotist wore, but it must have been replaced along the way.”

“And how did you learn all that?” he asked. I noticed that he didn’t scoff at the idea of abilities that could be amplified by crystals.

“From interviewing sources,” I hedged, not meeting his eyes.

“What sources?”

I took a deep breath, braced myself, and said, “This is going to sound weird, but I can talk to ghosts. Or they can talk to me. More accurately, I can see and hear them. That’s probably the more unusual part. Ghosts talk to people all the time, but not many can hear them. I can. It seems like I’ve been able to do this all my life, but I only recently learned what was really going on.”

I waited for his response, but he just nodded. “Yeah, it stands to reason. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have been eligible for the job.”

I let out the anxious breath I’d been holding in a big whoosh of relief. That was followed quickly by a surge of anger. “You knew, all this time?”

“Remember, my grandmother’s on the board. I know Miss Jean’s still in charge.”

Now I was really glad we hadn’t gone to the diner because here I could screech at him in full voice. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

He shrugged. “I thought you might not have come to terms with it yet. It’s a big adjustment. Or it was possible that you didn’t yet know the truth, and I didn’t want to be the one to drop that on you. Is that why you were so keen on this case, some ghost told you something?”

I took a few sips of tea to steady myself before saying, “Yeah, at Marybeth’s house. A ghost there told me the jewelry was more valuable than anyone realized. That got me started looking into it further, though at first I thought it was just that maybe the supposedly fake gemstones really were diamonds.”

“So, that’s why you were acting like those crimes were a really big deal.”

“Uh huh. I talked to the ghost again, and she made it sound like we were all doomed if the crystals were reunited. Another ghost told me the background about what the crystals could do. I had to piece together a lot of it to connect all the dots. Ghosts aren’t particularly precise. I guessed about the tiara.”

“Why didn’t you say something to me?”

I didn’t like the accusation in his tone, so I snapped, “I didn’t have a lot of confidence that ‘A ghost told me the crystals were magic’ would be taken seriously.”

“In this town? We’ve seen weirder. Now, tell me what you’ve got.”

I told him about what I’d seen in the museum, the photo in which all the stolen pieces of jewelry were worn, and my theories about the troupe hypnotist. “It was a guess that they might try winning the tiara if they couldn’t steal it, and they’d use the crystals they’d already taken to make sure that happened. The final clue was Evelyn’s brooch. I wore it to interview the queen candidates yesterday, and someone tried to get into my apartment while I was at dinner last night. Only the queen candidates knew I had the last piece from the pact. But don’t worry, I had the brooch with me. Unfortunately, they didn’t get in, so Jean didn’t see who it was.”

“And no surveillance cameras. Given the number of people who’ve either broken in here or tried to break in, maybe you should look into that. I’m sure the board would fund it.”

“That would have been handy last night.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re right about the tiara,” he said.

“Yeah, that’s what you said at the museum. Did you notice something?”

“Kind of.” He glanced down, seemed to realize he was holding a mug of tea, took a sip, cleared his throat, and said, “I read it from somebody during the photo shoot.”

“Read? Like some kind of cop thing where you’re tuned in to stuff like body language and facial expressions so you can tell who’s guilty or hiding something?”

“More like reading minds.”

I’d just taken a sip, and I barely stopped myself from spewing tea across the room. “What?” He’d taken my revelation calmly, but now I was freaking out. “Seriously? You read minds? You’re psychic?” My voice was a lot shriller than I’d have liked, and I barely stopped myself from edging away from him. Only the look on his face stopped me. He looked like a puppy scolded for making a mess on the carpet, and I felt like I was standing over him with a rolled-up newspaper. I forced myself to calm down, which was difficult when I realized that if he could read minds, he probably knew way too much about me. I felt like I was living that nightmare in which I show up to school naked. What had I thought about while I was with him? And what about now? Did he know what I was thinking now?

He winced, and I wasn’t sure if he was reading my mind or just picking up on my pretty obvious reaction. “Don’t worry, it’s not that precise. I only hear verbalized thoughts, and I can’t usually tell who’s thinking them. It’s not like hearing people talk, where you can recognize voices. The thoughts all sound pretty much like my own thoughts. I can only tell exactly who’s thinking if there’s some clue in the thought. And not all people are easy to read. Like you. I have a really hard time reading you. I only seem to pick up on things you want me to hear. That’s part of why I initially suspected you of the murder when we first met. I couldn’t read a thing from you, which made me wonder what you were hiding.”

Relief flooded through me. Maybe he hadn’t heard me thinking that he was kind of cute. I clamped down on that thought, then remembered something. “That’s how you came to the rescue when Keaton attacked me! I mentally cried out for help. I didn’t realize anyone could hear me, but I really wanted to be heard then.”

“And I heard you, loud and clear. Usually, it doesn’t reach that

far, and most of the time I don't get anything from you at all. It was a pain when I was trying to figure out whether or not you'd committed a murder, but now it's restful being around you, though sometimes a little weird because I'm so used to knowing what people are thinking."

"But why don't you hear me?" I asked.

"It may have something to do with you hearing ghosts," he said. "You've learned to put up a psychic block so you aren't bothered by ghosts all the time, and that also works against other mental intrusions. But we can discuss our respective abilities later. We have a crime to stop."

"You thought the thief was at the crime watch meeting. Did you read something then?"

He nodded. "Someone in the room was pretty smug about not getting caught, but I couldn't tell where the thought came from. Today I heard someone thinking that if they didn't win, everything they'd done would have been wasted. And you may be right about that tiara enhancing abilities. Everything I heard once I opened the case was louder and clearer than usual. I could barely pick that one thought out of everything I was reading, so I have no idea who was thinking it."

"I've narrowed it down to either Kaylee or Candy, or someone associated with them."

He seemed to have relaxed a bit after his confession, and he leaned back against the sofa. "What's your thinking?"

"Well, for one thing, the person who dropped the jewelry box and what little Jean saw of the person who came here last night was a woman of average size, which rules out Latisha and Kylie. I also couldn't find a motive for either of them. There are good reasons they're popular, and they already seem to have the main things they want. On the other hand, Kaylee needs to win this title to be eligible to compete in some pageant. As far as I can tell, pageants are the only thing she really cares about. I also find her popularity kind of fishy. It's hard to believe anyone would vote for

her for anything, she's so sour. That makes me wonder if she's putting them under some kind of whammy."

"Or her dad is absolutely loaded and sells fancy foreign cars, so everyone thinks if they're friends with Kaylee they'll get to ride in her Porsche or maybe get a good deal on a car."

"Yeah, I did wonder about that after that announcement this morning. And it seems like she was out of town during spring break, when some of the thefts happened, though an accomplice could have done that. If they're that rich, she could even have hired someone—or persuaded them, if she's got that hypnosis power."

"Maybe," he said with a nod. "Meanwhile, Candy's father is about to go on trial. Being able to influence a judge and jury might come in handy."

Before our confessions, I'd just about decided it had to be Candy, but now I found myself arguing against her. "It didn't sound like Candy was all that keen on that when I talked to her. She's really mad at him, doesn't want her mother to get back with him, and wants him punished. It's hard to imagine her participating in thefts in order to accomplish something she doesn't want."

"Maybe she's not the one driving things. Ashley seems to want Andy back, and I'm sure she wants him cleared of the charges. It may be the other way around, with Ashley as the main thief and Candy as the accomplice. I don't know how many break-ins Candy might have been part of, but at least one piece of jewelry went missing from the school, and that seems to have been one of the first thefts, so she's involved, even if she is reluctant."

"Does Ashley have sideshow links?"

"None that she talks about. Her family was more likely to burn people like that at the stake."

"Would that rule her out as a suspect?"

"Not necessarily. Having seen her in action in high school, I wouldn't be surprised to find she has some kind of hypnosis

power.” He blushed and glanced away. “I even fell under her spell for a while. Leading up to the election for homecoming queen, I think every boy in the school fell in love with her, even if we didn’t actually like her.”

“You didn’t read anything from her then?”

“I don’t think she was doing it on purpose back then. She may have just learned about it lately, soon before the thefts started. If we’re dealing with a hypnotist who could sway people to his will, it might not have been an acknowledged connection. They didn’t have DNA tests back then.”

“It doesn’t look like Candy got that power. She’s invisible, not popular. Well, not until the nomination, but it sounds like that was more of a pity vote. She strikes me as a good kid. I liked her.” Realization struck me, and I shook my head and groaned. “She whammied me, didn’t she?”

“Maybe,” he said with a grin. “But it would explain a lot if that’s what’s going on with them.”

“Do you think she influenced that poor girl to try to break into the school?”

“It’s possible. Her thoughts were really jumbled. She truly didn’t know what she was doing there. Someone influenced her, and I doubt it was an adult getting her involved.”

“Even if it is Ashley and Candy, we have no evidence. We’ve just guessed, with our conclusions coming either from me talking to ghosts or from you reading minds. You can’t arrest anyone based on that. And we don’t know for certain that it is them. It could be Kaylee.” I couldn’t help but wonder if I was still leaning toward Kaylee because she made more sense or because Candy had influenced me. Or maybe neither. I probably identified a lot more with Candy than Kaylee.

“Yes, it could,” Wes said, though he didn’t sound too convinced. “But right now, we have no way of knowing. I can’t even search them and find the stolen property—and that’s if we could prove where those crystals came from if I found them.”

“That’s probably why they returned the jewelry. All they wanted were the crystals, so they kept those and got rid of everything else. You’ve got to give them credit for not just destroying it all.”

“I don’t care about the jewelry or even the tiara right now. I need to make an arrest to get the town settled down so people will stop shooting at everyone who comes close to their house.”

“Then there’s Ashley possibly corrupting the justice system.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t arrest her for planning to try to hypnotize a jury or judge.”

“But we can stop her from getting that tiara, and we may be able to get the rest of the crystals away from her. And then maybe we can fluster her into making a mistake, like your silver thieves running a stop sign.”

“If you’ve got any ideas, I’m open to suggestions.”

Chapter Eighteen

“I think our first step is to keep Candy from winning the tiara,” I said. “After that, we can worry about finding evidence so you can clear the theft cases. I’m assuming that you’ll be handling security at the pageant, and I’ll be there to cover it. We can make sure she doesn’t influence anyone so that at least it’s a fair contest.”

Wes shook his head. “No, this isn’t a beauty pageant. It isn’t decided there. The voting happens at school ahead of time.”

“Seriously? Tami said there wasn’t any competition, like with talent or interview. I didn’t realize the whole event was to present something that was already decided.”

“That’s how the Oscars work. They vote before the ceremony. Those clips they show during the ceremony can’t influence the vote.”

“Okay, then maybe we could exchange the crystals that are in the tiara for ordinary crystals. Then winning the tiara wouldn’t do anyone any good, so it wouldn’t matter who won.”

“I’m not sure we could make that happen, thanks to all the security around the tiara right now. Even I can’t get into the case without the security system being disarmed.”

“Lupe donated it. Maybe she’d be willing to take it for cleaning or spiffing up before the ceremony.”

He frowned. “That’s a thought. But our thief still has all the other crystals. We don’t know how much power that gives her. It

won't be as much as the tiara, but it might be enough to sway a trial."

"I don't suppose you can engineer an excuse to be around our suspects and read what they've got planned—preferably one-on-one, so you'll know exactly who you're reading."

"That would only work if they're actively thinking about their plans and verbalizing their thoughts when they're around me. More likely, all I'd get would be something like, 'I wonder if he knows anything.' Even if I did read something, I couldn't take any action based on it."

"But it might narrow down who it is and help us make plans." Something occurred to me. "That's how you made that silver bust, isn't it? You read them thinking about stealing silver and followed them until they gave you a reason to pull them over. What did you do, wander around town until you found them?"

"Something like that. We'd had a call about another theft, and I thought it wouldn't hurt to look for someone getting gas, since they'd probably have to drive back out of town. I drove around to the most likely places, looked for cars I didn't recognize, listened, then focused on the ones who seemed the likely sources of the thoughts. I couldn't take them in based on reading their minds, so I had to keep an eye on them and wait for them to give me a reason to stop them. Fortunately, they got distracted, ran that stop sign, then panicked and tried to run when I flashed my lights."

"I guess that gift comes in really handy for a cop."

"Up to a point. It's frustrating when I know someone did something, but I can't do anything because there's no evidence even when I go looking for it, and they've given me no probable cause to search them. You don't know how many times I've had to walk past someone who's thinking, 'I hope that cop doesn't find my drugs.' I can't stop and search them for thinking, and when they're being really careful, they don't do anything that looks suspicious."

"Well, then, what can we do to keep the election honest? I'm assuming Candy doesn't stand a chance without extraordinary

powers coming into play. I think the main thing would be to keep Candy away from school as much as possible on the day of the vote so she can't influence anyone. Maybe I can ask for an interview."

He shook his head. "Her mother won't let her do anything that will keep her away from school that day. I could hope she breaks some traffic law on the way to school so my people can pull her over, but that only delays her. We need her out until after lunch."

"What if it's Kaylee, not Candy?"

"It would be a lot harder to stop her from winning, since she could legitimately get votes."

"What we need are some students on our side. They may have ideas."

"I'll talk to my cousin. Tami will be all over this. Upsetting the patriarchy is her hobby." He glanced at his watch. "We'll have to regroup some other time. I'm technically on duty now and I've been hiding out here far too long. Maybe if we mull it over, we can think of something."

I walked him to the door. "I'm glad I know that you know about me now," I said. "It was so weird knowing something that might be useful but that I couldn't tell you because I learned it from a ghost."

"That's how you solved the murder, wasn't it?"

"Jean tipped me off about what Ogden was looking into, since she was the one who tipped him off, and then the dead girl's ghost gave me some clues. I pieced together the rest, but only about a minute before Keaton showed up. There's no way I would have been able to figure it out without the information from the ghosts, though."

"If someone ever tells you who killed them, I'd like to know. I can reverse engineer an investigation, if I have to. And, um, would you mind if we keep the thing about the mind reading between us? A few people I've known a long time know, and some people know about my family and might suspect, but I'd rather it not be public knowledge."

“You don’t want to lose your crime fighting edge, huh? Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me. And I’d rather keep quiet about the ghosts, while we’re at it.”

“Deal.” He grinned and held up his hand, wiggling his little finger. “Pinkie swear?”

“Seriously? You didn’t outgrow that in fifth grade?” Still, I hooked my pinkie around his and said, “Swear.”

“Swear,” he agreed. “Let’s touch base later and see what we can come up with.”

I reluctantly unhooked my pinkie from his. The contact had been tiny, but had done more for me than my last kiss had. “You know where to find me,” I said, hoping he hadn’t read that last thought. I paused with my hand on the lock. “Your grandmother doesn’t read minds, does she?” I’d have to be really careful if the person who signed my paychecks was a mind reader.

“I don’t think she does it to the extent I do, but she does seem to have a sixth sense. I imagine you confound her as much as you do me.”

I started to wonder exactly what he meant about me confounding him but stopped the thought before I mentally verbalized it. “We’ll talk later,” I said, opening the door and ushering him out.

When he was gone, I locked the door behind him. I’d been so worried about whether he would think I sounded crazy that it hadn’t occurred to me he might also be hiding something. Other things about him clicked into place, like his tendency to avoid crowds. The mental din in a big group of people must be unbearable for him. I wondered if his feud with Jordan had anything to do with something he read from his former friend. I could see why Wes preferred to keep quiet about his gift, too. People would just think I was weird, maybe a curiosity, if they knew about me. If people knew about him, they’d avoid him. Frankly, if I didn’t know he found me hard to read, I’d probably avoid him. Who wants to be around someone who can read their

thoughts?

Wes texted me Sunday afternoon that Tami was in on the scheme and would bring a friend. We agreed to meet at my place Sunday night. He offered to bring the pizza. I ran to the store to pick up drinks and snacks. I didn't know what teens these days liked, but if I'd been invited to a planning session when I was a kid, I'd have wanted pretzels and chips. I also picked up some healthier items, like carrot sticks and fruit, that I could have handy if one of the girls wanted other options.

At the appointed time, there was a complicated knock on my door, followed by the sound of giggling. I opened it to find Wes standing behind two girls. "Hey, Ms. Lincoln," Tami said. "This is my friend, Jenny."

I recognized the girl from the attempted break-in at the school. "Thanks for your help," I said. "Come on in." Wes glanced toward heaven, as if in supplication, as he passed me, carrying the pizza. I got the impression that whatever time he'd spent with them had already been too much. I wondered if teenagers' mental chatter was even more intense than what they said out loud.

He was dressed in civilian clothes, jeans and a blue shirt that turned his eyes blue to match. I quickly stopped that thought. I didn't want to take any chances that my mental barriers would choose a bad time to falter, though I supposed that with the girls there, he might not know where the thought originated. I hoped he'd assume it was one of the teens with a crush. He hadn't made any move toward asking me out, so it didn't look like my crush was reciprocated, and I didn't want things to get too awkward between us, since we had to work together so often.

"I've got drinks out on the table. Help yourselves," I said.

Once we'd loaded plates—my healthier options weren't requested—we gathered in the living room to strategize. "Thanks for helping us with this," I said, hoping I didn't sound too much like I was chairing a board meeting. "How much has Wes told you about what's going on?"

“That either Candy or Kaylee is using mind control powers to get the tiara so she can make her powers even stronger,” Tami said around a bite of pizza. “And we are totally on board with that after Jenny got ripped off.”

“It’s not like I was entitled to the nomination,” Jenny said, blushing.

“Yeah, but you’d have been nominated if Candy wasn’t. And that was either Candy swaying things to get herself up there or Kaylee eliminating some of the competition. Plus, whoever it was set you up to get busted for triggering the school alarm.”

“Any ideas on how we can keep either of them from influencing the election?” I asked.

“It’s a shame it’s a paper vote, or we could get Jenny to tinker with the voting machines,” Tami said. “She has electrical powers.”

“We don’t want to cheat,” Wes said. “We just want to stop them from cheating. I’m assuming Candy is unlikely to win unless she has a supernatural ability to influence people.”

The girls looked at each other. “Well, maybe,” Tami said. “She’s not popular, but I don’t think anyone dislikes her. She might get the rebel vote from the people who hate popular people and think the whole thing is stupid. I can think of a few who’d vote for her not so much because they want her to win, but because they don’t want Kylie or Kaylee to win.”

“And I think some people might really vote for her,” Jenny said. “There are those who feel sorry for her because of that whole thing with her dad and because her mom’s the way she is. Winning this would make life easier for her at home.”

“Who do you think would most likely win if everything were fair and there were no powers involved?” I asked.

“My money’s on Latisha because everyone likes her,” Tami said. “She’s got the jocks behind her, but she’s also a brain and nice to the nerds, which Kaylee and Kylie aren’t, unless they want something.”

“Kylie’s nice to the nerds, but in a generic sort of way,” Jenny

put in. “She’s not friends with them and wouldn’t sit with them in the cafeteria or invite them to a party, but she smiles and says hi, which is more than Kaylee ever does.”

“Latisha’s also a soloist in the choir, so she’s got the music people,” Tami added. “And a bunch of her family is in the band. Her brother’s lead alto sax. I’d guess she has the band sewn up.”

“And I think Kaylee and Kylie will split the usual popular crowd vote,” Jenny said. “So, if there are no superpowers, Latisha wins.”

“When does the voting happen?” I asked.

“The election’s Friday. There’s voting before school, and then again at lunch,” Jenny said.

“There’s usually a lot of campaigning going on right before school on that day,” Tami said. “Like, they’ll bring doughnuts or coffee or other stuff for the kids hanging out before the bell. Everyone has to walk past them on the way into the building, and the voting is set up in the school foyer. They work the cafeteria during lunch, handing out stuff like candy, cookies, or cupcakes. Voting ends after the last lunch period, and then the principal and office staff count the votes. The student council used to do it, but they got caught deliberately miscounting on one election. There’s also a staff member supervising the voting, so the student council members running the voting can’t mark up a bunch of ballots.”

“Wow, your school elections are brutal,” I said.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Ogden did an exposé after someone” —she shrugged and batted her eyelashes— “tipped him off. It was quite the scandal. And it explains a lot about who won everything and why the same clique kept getting elected to the council and to every honor.”

“It sounds like the before-school and lunch periods are key,” Wes said in a businesslike tone. “If we can disrupt her from swaying people going to vote then, it should keep things more or less honest.”

“I don’t suppose there’s anything that works opposite to the crystals, that dampens powers,” I said.

“Not that I’m aware of,” Wes said with a slight wince. I realized he probably would be using it if it existed.

“Then we need to find a way to keep our suspects away from the students while voting’s going on,” I said.

“I think we should focus on making sure Latisha wins. She should win it anyway, and if we support her while trying to keep anyone else from influencing voters, that will make sure the election is fair,” Jenny said.

“Breakfast tacos!” Tami said. “People will flock to the best free food, and that will keep them away from the other candidates.”

“I’m pretty sure I can get Latisha’s grandmother to work with us on this,” I said.

“Her mom’s a great cook,” Jenny said. “She was our homeroom mother when we were in elementary school.”

“And what about lunchtime?” Wes asked. “We might be able to distract voters before school, but the candidates will be around people all morning and during lunch. More food?”

“Maybe by then we’ll have a better idea who our suspect is,” I said. “We can watch how they’re all acting in the morning.”

“If it’s Candy, that’s easy. We won’t have to worry about the people who’ve already voted, so maybe a group of us could surround her and be super friendly at lunch, so she won’t have a chance to talk to people who haven’t voted,” Jenny suggested. “She’s usually pretty lonely.”

“Okay, that’s good,” Tami agreed. “We’ll make sure we vote early so it doesn’t matter if she influences us, and then we’ll sit with her at lunch and make it seem like she can campaign to us. I can drag a few more folks in. I don’t know what to do if it’s Kaylee. People like us would never get anywhere near her. I guess I could bump into her in line and spill something so she has a chance to unleash her inner bitch on me in front of everyone.”

“What about the crystals?” I asked. “Our suspect is probably using the ones she’s already taken to amplify her persuasive ability. I wonder if we could get them away from her or swap them out.”

Tami beamed. "I know just the person. A friend of mine is great at magic tricks. He's always getting stuff out of people's pockets without them noticing. The thief has to have them on her, probably in a pocket. He'd just have to bump into her to get them."

"If they work as advertised, I might feel the difference when I get close to them," Jenny put in. "Then we'll know who to target."

"I can get a bunch of fake crystals at a craft store," Tami continued, "and then maybe we can make a switch so she won't notice they're gone. We'll try to do that during the week, before the election."

"That would certainly confirm who the suspect is," I said. "I can't think of why anyone else would be carrying a bunch of little crystals around at school."

"How many crystals should there be?" Tami asked. "I want to make sure we get the right number. If most of them are like the one in my necklace, they're pretty small."

"Based on the number in the pact photo and the number of thefts we know about, I'd guess about twenty," I said. "But I doubt they'll be counting them, under the circumstances, as long as it looks about right."

"Normally I wouldn't endorse pickpocketing," Wes said, "but this is already stolen property. I just don't want to know any additional details about this part of the plan."

"What if she put them in some other jewelry and is wearing them?" Jenny said. "It would be hard to tell then."

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that," Tami said, her shoulders slumping. "That would make things tougher. What we can try is to get you near our suspects and see if you feel anything like a power surge."

"Are any of our suspects crafty?" I asked. "Would they have the tools to make jewelry? Or is there someone in town they might go to for something like that? Neither girl mentioned jewelry making as a hobby in our interviews."

"If they've made it this far without getting caught, they're

probably smart enough not to show up to a jewelry maker in this town with a bunch of crystals they want set,” Wes said.

“It’s worth a try to go after the crystals, but this is why we need a multiprong plan,” I said. “I’ll be there on Friday to cover the voting. That’ll give me a chance to keep an eye on things. Will Candy’s mom be able to be on campus?”

“Not during the school day, but parents usually help with the pre-school campaigning.”

“I know how Ashley drives,” Wes said. “I’ll make sure we have traffic patrols between her house and the school. A ticket for speeding or running a stop sign should at least delay her.”

“Okay, action items,” I said. “I’ll talk to Charlene about supporting her granddaughter’s candidacy with the good food. Tami will get her pickpocket friend on board, and Jenny will try to get close enough to the suspects to sense a power surge. Tami and Jenny will vote early and then distract Candy during lunch or create a scene with Kaylee, depending on what we’ve figured out by then. Wes will make sure Ashley doesn’t get to the school. If anyone comes up with additional or better ideas, let us know.”

It was a little sobering to realize that the integrity of the justice system might rely on a teenage pickpocket and some breakfast tacos.

Chapter Nineteen

Charlene was enthusiastic about our scheme. She and her family had already planned to support Latisha, and she was determined that no one would get away with cheating her grandbaby. I didn't know how up on the magic stuff Lupe was, so I talked to Evelyn about getting the tiara crystals swapped out, and she said she'd deal with it. I was busy enough the rest of the week getting the paper to press that I didn't have time to think about it.

When I hadn't heard anything from Tami and her friends about determining the right girl or getting the crystals, I worried that we might be too late to stop the influence. I still found myself feeling sympathetic to Candy and hoping Kaylee was the thief. If that was an effect of Candy's power, she might have already influenced the school. I hoped it was just my inclination to side with an underdog. I was sure she'd been honest with me about how she felt about her father, so I couldn't help but believe her mother was making her do this, if she was the one.

The first setback came when Evelyn called me Thursday morning. "I'm afraid we can't do anything about the tiara before the festival," she said. "The replacement crystals would have to be custom-made, and Lupe couldn't find a jeweler who could do the job in time. We'd have to send it to Dallas, and that would mean it being away long enough for it to be noticed."

"Thanks for trying," I said, suppressing a groan. "I should have thought of that when I first realized it might be a target."

“We’ll make sure to do it after the festival so it won’t be a threat in the future,” she assured me.

That meant the rest of our plans had to succeed.

The next setback came later that afternoon when Tami and Jenny came to the office, both of them looking dejected. “Operation Crystal Swap has been a total bust so far,” Tami said, slouching into my guest chair and throwing one leg over the arm. “We haven’t been able to get near either of our suspects. The sycophants have been out in force, so they wouldn’t go near plebes like us.”

“Even Candy?” I asked. “She doesn’t seem the type.”

“The people who normally couldn’t get near a popular circle have sensed opportunity and are strategically positioning themselves in case she wins.”

“You weren’t able to sense any power boost from either of them?” I asked Jenny.

“I’m afraid not.”

I forced myself not to sigh audibly because I didn’t want them to feel like they’d disappointed me. “That’s okay. We still have plan A. In fact, Charlene took off early today to prepare. From the sounds of things, you won’t want to eat breakfast at home tomorrow.”

“We should be able to get closer to them in the morning,” Jenny said hopefully. “Whoever it is will want to get close enough to us to influence us.”

“Just be sure to vote before you get back on Operation Crystal Swap,” I warned.

I got to the school early on Friday. Charlene and her family were already in the school parking lot with a setup that rivaled anything I’d seen among tailgaters at a college or professional football game. It was a mini carnival in its own right, a pavilion with multiple food stations, games, prizes, music, and lots of “Vote for Latisha” banners. Her relatives served food and passed out buttons and ribbons. The pavilion was packed with kids, and the

school's front steps where I imagined kids usually hung out were almost vacant. The only people there were Kylie, sitting behind a pink-draped table with doughnut boxes on it and surrounded by a small group of friends, and Candy, standing awkwardly by herself. I didn't see Kaylee anywhere.

I went over to the Latisha carnival to say hi to Charlene. "I thought I ought to come inspect the food," I said to her.

She grinned and gestured around. "What do you want? We've got waffle sticks over there, biscuits over there with sausage or bacon, and breakfast tacos over here."

"I'll start with a taco as an appetizer," I said. She brought me over to a table where an enormous man wearing a frilly apron that said "Kiss the Cook" on it stood over a warming dish filled with foil-wrapped bundles.

"This is my baby boy, Ernest," she said. "Ernest, this is my new boss, Lexie. Lexie would like a taco."

"What kind?" he asked in a deep, rumbling voice. "We've got chorizo, bacon, and plain with just eggs."

I got a chorizo taco and ate it while wandering around the pavilion, getting a sense of the scene. Latisha worked the crowd like a politician, speaking to everyone and thanking them for coming. Every so often, someone from her team would escort a group of students to the school, ushering them past the other candidates on the steps. It looked like our plan A was working nicely—and tasting good, too. I snagged a sausage biscuit and headed out to keep an eye on the overall scene.

I noticed that Wes was there, looking official in his uniform and aviator shades. I wandered over to him. "Anticipating drama today?" I asked.

"We always keep an eye on the school parking lot in the mornings. I drew the duty today."

"Funny how that worked out."

"Yes, indeed. You may be interested to learn that Ashley had a fender bender in the doughnut shop parking lot. She backed into

someone when she wasn't looking. As I said, I'm familiar with her driving. I doubt she'll make it here before school starts. My guys are being very thorough in investigating the accident."

"Poor Candy," I said, looking over to where she stood alone on the school steps.

"She really did get to you," he said with a smirk.

"It wouldn't take magic to make me feel bad for her. Look at her, standing there by herself when the other candidates have all that going on. Anyone who's ever felt left out would sympathize."

Another group headed from the pavilion toward the school, with Latisha and some of her relatives walking along with them. Candy made a tentative move toward them, but backed away.

"That's one group of voters who won't be influenced," I said.

"Other than by Charlene's cooking," Wes said.

"Yeah, but that's normal influence, not hypnosis. It's just taking the usual handouts up a notch. The kids are still free to choose who they want to vote for."

Charlene came over to us with a plate. "You could probably use some breakfast, officer," she said.

"Thank you," he said, taking a sausage biscuit from the plate. Since she was also holding it in my general direction, I took another one, rationalizing that I didn't know when or if I'd get to eat lunch.

"Do you think it's working?" Charlene asked softly.

"Looks like it," I said. "Thanks for doing this."

She raised an eyebrow. "You asked me to cook and support my granddaughter. That's not exactly a hardship."

"And stop a foul scheme," I said.

"Yeah, that, too. Well, gotta get back to supervising."

Wes finished his biscuit. "I advise you to have frequent office potlucks, if this is any indication of Charlene's cooking. These are better biscuits than you get at the diner."

"I don't think it would be fair for her to cook something good while I contribute a bag of chips and a bottle of soda. And our boss

is dead. She wouldn't be able to join us."

"That does put a damper on potlucks."

A blare of pop music and the roar of an engine momentarily drowned out the party at the Robinson pavilion as a bright red Porsche convertible entered the parking lot, Kaylee at the wheel. "I was wondering when she'd show up," I said. When she got out of the car, she wasn't carrying so much as a bag of candy. "That's confidence," I added. "She acts like she doesn't even need to campaign." Then I noticed something sparkling at her neck. "And look at the bling. Are those diamonds, or could they maybe be crystals?"

"Knowing her family, probably diamonds," Wes remarked. "And I'm not sure how confident she is." He gestured toward the food truck that was pulling in behind Candy's Porsche. According to the signs on the truck, it served gourmet coffee. It was draped in banners proclaiming "Kaylee for Queen."

"Free lattes!" Kaylee bellowed, using her cheerleader voice.

There was a small stampede in that direction. "Uh oh," I said.

Tami, Jenny, and a tall, skinny boy joined us. "Voting accomplished," Tami said. "There was actually a line, but now we're safe even if someone tries to persuade us."

"She brought a coffee truck?" the boy said. He glanced down at the waffle stick he held. "Coffee would go good with this."

"I'll go get some," Jenny offered, turning to give us a theatrical wink. She fought her way through the crowd and managed to get right next to Kaylee, who stood by the truck's service window. She came back a few minutes later with a cup of coffee, which she handed to the boy. "I didn't feel anything," she reported. "I mean, other than surprise that Kaylee actually acknowledged my existence."

"Then you'd better check Candy," I said. She had a bit of a crowd around her now, which I found surprising, given that she didn't have anything to hand out. A chant rose from that crowd, "Candy! Candy! Candy!" My spirits sank. I'd been hoping it was

Kaylee, that Candy was merely an ordinary girl with a messed-up family. In just about any teen movie, the mean-girl cheerleader would turn out to be the villain and the plain Jane would end up winning. This felt wrong.

“Come on, Darren,” Tami said. “Looks like we’re going to need you to work your magic.”

“You’re sure you can do this without her noticing?” I said.

“My great-grandfather had the magic act in the sideshow,” Darren said. So, there was probably literal magic at work here.

“Be careful,” I warned.

The three of them headed to the school steps and approached Candy. Meanwhile, Latisha’s supporters started their own chant, led by cheerleaders in uniform with their pompons. Kaylee’s caffeinated crew started an energetic cheer that soon fizzled out as everyone went back to their coffee. It didn’t seem like the people around Kylie even noticed what was going on.

Wes abruptly stepped forward and waved. “Excuse me, this is a no phone zone!” he called out to a driver who was talking on a cell phone while dropping a kid off.

“This isn’t looking good,” I fretted aloud.

“Remember, we just want to stop Candy,” Wes said. “Otherwise, it doesn’t matter who wins.”

I watched as our team joined the throng around Candy. If Darren needed a diversion for his pickpocketing, that crowd was a good one. Tami and Jenny stood in front of her as Darren edged in beside her. A moment later, the two of them eased out of the crowd. I lost sight of them behind all those people. Darren rejoined the crowd. They hung around a few more minutes before returning to us, walking quickly in a way that looked like they were trying to be casual but were actually quite eager. Anyone watching them would have suspected they were up to something. Fortunately, I seemed to be the only person watching them.

“We got ’em!” Tami said in a stage whisper. She looked around, as though making sure no one was watching, then dropped a small

plastic baggie into my hand. A quick glance told me the baggie contained a bunch of tiny crystals.

Jenny stayed a few feet away. "Keep those away from me unless you don't particularly like your cell phone."

I quickly tucked the packet into my jacket pocket. "Do you think she noticed anything?" I asked.

"It was a smooth swap," Darren said. "Some of my best work. I think the crystals may have helped."

"I hope you don't make a habit of doing that sort of thing," Wes said. With his dark aviator sunglasses on, it was hard to tell whether or not he was serious.

"Only on stage, sir," Darren said. "I do magic acts. I'll do stuff like make something from your wallet come out of your ear, but this is the first time I've actually taken something."

"Good. Keep it that way," Wes said with a curt nod.

"I think we've been seen too much around you old people," Tami said. "We'll go mingle with our peers and campaign for Latisha."

The kids ran off, back to the school building. I waited a few minutes before saying, "I think you should take these." I patted the pocket where I'd put the crystals.

"They won't be much good as evidence, since I doubt any of them are etched with identifying marks, and we have no chain of custody."

"Not as evidence, but you can probably use the power boost more than I can. Being able to see ghosts better won't be much help today, but getting a better read on people's minds might come in handy."

He turned to me, and I wished I could see his eyes behind his glasses. "You want to make me read minds better, here, at a high school? Do you know what that means?"

"Probably a lot of assessment of other kids and worry about what they're thinking. But it might be good to get a read on how people are going to vote and if anyone's planning anything fishy."

“Okay, I’ll take them,” he said, with no sign of enthusiasm. I slipped the package out of my pocket and into his hand, and he quickly pocketed it.

“Get anything? Do they work?”

“Oh, they work. Wow. Not quite as strong as the tiara, but I wasn’t wearing the tiara.”

“I bet it would look cute on you.”

Frowning, he surveyed the parking lot. “So far, most of the vote thoughts are about Latisha. No one’s thought about Candy yet, not that I’ve heard.”

“It really is nonstop for you, isn’t it?” I said, starting to realize what his gift must mean for his daily life.

“I’ve mostly learned to turn it all into background noise. Things only occasionally jump out at me. You’d be surprised how boring most people’s thoughts are most of the time. I hear a lot of grocery lists, to-do lists, and reminders of chores. Here, there’s some worry about a math test. A few kids have big dates tonight. I wish I knew who one of them was so I could warn his date what he has planned for her.”

I shuddered at the thought of being privy to that kind of information, all the time. After a few moments of silence, I said, “So, we seem to have solved the case and identified the thieves.”

“We?” he said, raising an eyebrow above his sunglasses.

“Okay, so I was maybe leaning in the wrong direction, and it was technically the kids who got the final proof, but I don’t think we’d be where we are now without all of us contributing. You wouldn’t even have known there was more going on than petty theft without my input.”

“True. I suppose it was a team effort.”

“Now, what can we do about it?”

“Doing something about it is definitely not a ‘we’ job. It’s my job. There’s nothing I can do about it within the law. I can’t prove anything about them committing the crimes, so I can’t arrest them, which doesn’t solve my problems.” He jerked his head around to

look at me, and I felt his glare, even from behind the mirrored shades. “And don’t go provoking them into committing a crime I can arrest them for.”

“Hey, I definitely did not intend for that guy to attack me once I figured out he’d committed two murders. Though I bet it wouldn’t be too hard to get Ashley to come at me, and then you could get her for assault.”

“Lex . . .” he warned.

“Kidding!” Maybe.

The flow of parents dropping kids off increased, and Wes moved to direct traffic. Most of the kids getting out of cars headed straight to the Robinsons’ pavilion, waved over by Robinson relatives holding balloons and signs. I got the impression that if you wanted to get something done, you needed to get the Robinsons on board. They were a well-oiled machine. I was a little envious. I’d never lived around my extended family. It must be nice to have grandparents, aunts and uncles, and a herd of cousins nearby who were all part of your regular life. I seldom saw my extended family together, only at weddings and funerals.

Kylie and her friends, who must also have been twirlers, started doing a showy baton routine on the school steps. Kaylee had resorted to actually smiling, waving, and greeting people as they came to her truck to get coffee. Candy still stood alone and empty-handed on the school steps. She made a few attempts at approaching people, and she did get a few to slow down to talk to her, but it wasn’t like before.

A car raced through the parking lot, and Wes turned and shouted. It stopped with a screech in a parking space, and I noted that the rear bumper was dented. Ashley got out of the car, then got a stack of bakery boxes from the back seat. She paused to nod at Wes’s admonition about traffic rules in the school parking lot before hurrying up to Candy. She shoved the boxes into Candy’s arms and ran back to get a folding table and a big bouquet of balloons out of the trunk. They got the table set up and the

balloons tied to it. The whole time they worked, Ashley appeared to be berating Candy for not having done a better job of soliciting votes.

“Poor thing,” I said. “It’s not like it was her fault that the person bringing all her stuff got in a wreck on the way.”

“I know she’s going through some things, but she also broke into my grandmother’s house, and she’s probably the one who stole Tami’s necklace,” Wes reminded me. “Don’t get too sympathetic.

“Good point.” Still, I couldn’t help but feel bad as her mother took over campaigning, supposedly on her daughter’s behalf, but it looked to me like she was flirting heavily with the boys who passed, and they appeared alarmingly dazzled.

A bell rang, and any kids still in the parking lot headed indoors. That ended the morning voting period. We just had to get through lunchtime.

I got a visitor’s badge from the office, and during the lunch period I did “man on the street” interviews with the kids about the election and their views on the festival. Most of them didn’t care all that much. Voter turnout seemed to be at about the same level as for most local elections, which meant only the really involved kids even bothered. I hoped that made our task easier. I glanced through the cafeteria door and looked around for Tami. I finally saw her at a table full of girls, all surrounding a grinning Candy. Candy looked happier than I’d ever seen her, and I felt a little better about what we were doing to her. I just hoped Tami and her friends didn’t drop her entirely when all this was done. She struck me as a girl who could really use a friend.

Was that still the whammy, or did I actually feel that way?

A few kids trickled out of the cafeteria to vote at the tables set up in the foyer. The kids working the tables called out to all the passersby, encouraging them to vote. I approached one of the nonvoters and introduced myself. “Can you tell me why you’re not voting?”

“I don’t care,” he said with a shrug. “It’s not like it’s a real

queen. It's just some silly thing to decide who rides in a parade, and I'll be marching in it with the band."

Although the idea of not voting, even for a very minor election, rankled me, I thought the apathy was a good sign. If people didn't care enough to vote, that meant they hadn't been influenced.

Now we had to wait a week for the ceremony to see if our scheme had worked. I honestly couldn't tell how it had gone.

Chapter Twenty

A week later, I straightened my evening dress after getting out of my car in the school parking lot. Tonight would be our moment of truth. Had our efforts to sway the election been enough to counter Ashley and Candy's efforts to sway the election? And what would we do if we'd failed?

People were already arriving and streaming up the school steps. Inside the school foyer there was a line to get into the auditorium. When I reached the front of the line, the teenage boy checking tickets looked at my press invitation and said, "You'll be up front in our press section." He called another boy over to escort me. There were two seats in the front row with "press" signs taped to them, which probably meant the school newspaper would also be represented. I thanked the usher and took the press seat that wasn't next to the line of seats reserved for the nominees' families.

Wes, looking rather spiffy in a dark blue dress uniform, came over and sat beside me. "We're close to the moment of truth," he said, echoing my own earlier thought. He hadn't read that from me, had he?

"What'll we do if it didn't work?" I asked. "We can't let her get it."

"No, we can't, not after what I experienced with those crystals."

"Speaking of which, you should take this." I took Evelyn's brooch from my purse and handed it to him.

He took it from me, eyeing it skeptically. "I don't know. . ."

"You don't have to wear it on your uniform, though that would look rather fetching. Just put it in your pocket. One more crystal might not make a difference, but we need all the help we can get tonight."

He scanned the crowd. "It's a dull roar with so many people. I don't know how useful it will be."

"There's probably only going to be one person thinking about needing that tiara for its crystals."

"True."

"If she's planning something, you hearing her thinking about it may give us a jump on her."

"Me. Not us. I don't want you doing anything. You've been a big help, but you can't make arrests, and if you tackle someone, that's assault and battery."

"Unless maybe it's self-defense or defending someone else."

"There are enough cops here to deal with it. You just get the story." He paused and frowned. "But not the whole story, I hope. You're not planning to put all of this in the paper, are you?"

"I'd get laughed out of journalism if I wrote about the conspiracy to steal the magic crystals that enhance supernatural powers."

"Good. Just checking." He stood and moved to a position near the stage.

The usher brought Jenny down the aisle to the press section. "I wonder if it worked," she whispered as she took the seat next to me. "I'm so nervous."

"Me, too," I admitted.

The photographer arrived and asked, "You got anything in particular you want, or just the usual?"

"The usual, I guess," I said. "You know more about this event than I do. The main thing we'll want is the crowning of the new queen, plus maybe a few other shots to fill out a spread."

"You got it."

"Of course, if a brawl breaks out, I'll want a shot or two of

that,” I added, only half joking. There was no telling what might happen.

“We can only hope,” he said.

The families of the queen nominees and the duchesses filled in the first few rows. The seat next to Jenny remained empty, and I wondered if that was because it was the one farthest from the center or because of Jenny’s electric reputation. Remembering that, I made sure my purse with my phone in it was on my other side, away from her.

The auditorium lights were just starting to dim when Ashley rushed in. If I hadn’t known that her talent was persuasion and not the ability to shoot lasers out of her eyes, I’d have been worried about the look she gave Jenny and me before she gave a put-upon sigh and took the last remaining reserved seat. Her husband wasn’t with her, and no seat had been reserved for him.

The ceremony turned out to be a bizarre cross between a debutante ball and a beauty pageant, as Tami had said. The program opened with some scripted host patter awkwardly delivered by a couple of teens. The boy looked and sounded like he’d rather be anywhere else, while the girl was trying a bit too hard, injecting so much enthusiasm into every word and carefully rehearsed gesture that listening to her was exhausting and I found myself wishing for a tranquilizer gun. That might bring her down to a normal level.

The intros were followed by a production number involving members of the drill team holding cards with different kinds of spring flowers on them. Then it was time for the queen candidates to make their entrance. A small musical combo set up on a corner of the stage played as each candidate was escorted down the aisle by a boy. Kylie came first, wearing a fluffy pink concoction that made me think of cotton candy. I wondered if they’d have some at the carnival the next day. Once she made it onstage, Kylie stepped away from her escort and gave a deep curtsy to the audience. Her escort then ushered her to one of the thrones set at the back of the

stage.

Kaylee was next, wearing a form-fitting white gown with a slit up the leg. She walked like a pageant winner taking her victory lap and actually smiled, which I found surprising, given that the voting was over. Then again, there were cameras present. When she got on the stage, I could see that the fabric of her gown was full of glitter that caught the stage lights. That gown wasn't designed for curtsying, so she gave a perfunctory dip before taking her seat. Candy wore something that I suspected her mother had worn, a pale blue taffeta number with sheer fabric around the midriff. She walked with her head bowed like she was either trying to be invisible or trying not to look at anyone else. She lost her balance during her curtsy and her escort stepped forward to support her. Ashley groaned and shook her head. "Good thing the voting already happened," she muttered. Latisha wore a sleeveless purple gown that showed off sculpted arms. Her full skirt swirled around her legs as she walked, giving the illusion that she was gliding. The applause for her was a little louder than for the others. I thought that boded well, but then I realized it might have just been from her large extended family, all there to support her.

I was ready for the winner to be announced, but this was only the beginning of the ceremony. The show choir performed a song and dance routine before the parade of duchesses began. Tami hadn't been exaggerating about almost every organization in the school or town having a duchess, and we got to watch all of them come down the aisle, go onstage, and curtsy to the candidates and to the audience. First up were duchesses representing each of the high school classes and all the sports teams. Then the drama club did a skit. Next came duchesses representing school organizations, including Tami as representative of the computer club. She wore what I was fairly certain was a re-creation of a medieval gown, which was quite out of place among all the prom and pageant wear, and I couldn't help but grin. There was a dance routine, followed by still more duchesses representing community

organizations. I supposed I should have found someone to represent the newspaper, but Tami was already spoken for and Latisha was a queen nominee, and that covered all the girls who had a connection with the paper.

After nearly every girl in town had been presented and we'd suffered through yet another production number, we finally reached the moment we'd all been waiting for. The queen candidates stood from their thrones and moved to the front of the stage as a trumpeter played a fanfare. The principal stepped in from the wings and handed the emcees a sealed envelope. I held my breath as the emcees opened it. They paused for what felt like a ridiculously long amount of time, and I began to worry.

They seemed to be struggling with announcing the winner. Either they didn't like who'd won and were having to force themselves to say the name, or someone was trying to influence them to say something other than what was written on the card inside the envelope. Or maybe it was just my imagination and it only felt like forever, but it sounded like the drummer giving a drum roll was running out of steam.

Either Ashley or Candy was up to something, I was sure. It was a desperation move to make the emcees say Candy's name, even if she hadn't won. Surely there were other people who knew who the real winner was, but this might create confusion. I only wished we'd found some way to break the hypnosis whammy. I wondered if a shock would do it. I was sitting in front of the lectern where the emcees stood, so anything I did would be right in their faces. I pulled my phone out of my purse and took a picture of them, letting the flash blind them. Maybe that would shock them just enough.

Or would it? I found myself thinking that Candy really should win. She deserved it. Everyone had voted for her. I shook my head to clear the intrusive thoughts. Was Ashley trying to influence everyone there? We had to stop her. I whispered to Jenny, "Zap Ashley." She shook herself like she was waking up from a dream,

glanced at me, frowned, then nodded and reached over to touch Ashley's arm. Ashley jerked, and it was as though time started moving again. The emcees finally removed the card from the envelope. I was pretty sure that whatever Jenny had done had worked because I no longer hoped that Candy's name would be called.

In unison, they said, "The Spring Blossom Queen is . . . Latisha Robinson!"

While most of the audience applauded and some even stood and shouted, Ashley gave a squeal of frustrated outrage. I sagged back in my seat, weak with relief. We'd done it!

On the stage, Latisha acted out the traditional beauty pageant winner reaction of semifeigned disbelief that she had actually won. The other candidates crowded around her to congratulate her—Kaylee somewhat less than enthusiastically. Candy looked like a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Her smile seemed utterly genuine, and she was practically bouncing. The band played and the show choir crooned as the previous year's queen placed the tiara on Latisha's head, settling it among her curls. Even over the music and the applause, Ashley's groan was audible. I suspected she was thinking something alarming because Wes took a few steps toward us and kept his eye on her.

Now that it was all over, I was ready to get out of there, but it seemed it wasn't over yet. Latisha moved to sit in the center throne that had been unoccupied previously, and the other queen candidates went one by one to curtsy to her before leaving the stage and walking up the aisle. All the duchesses and their escorts came back onstage to make their bows to the newly crowned queen before joining the recessional. At least it went more quickly this time around, since there were no production numbers in between bows and the emcees didn't announce each duchess. Finally, Latisha made her final bow to the audience and retreated up the aisle. The auditorium lights came up, and the audience began to make their way out.

I stuck close to Ashley as she left, since I wasn't sure what she might do now that her plans had been thwarted. Wes joined me, so I was pretty sure she was at least thinking of doing something. Out in the school foyer, Latisha was surrounded by well-wishers, and the other candidates by those offering condolences and commiseration. Kaylee's scowl was in full force, but the others seemed like they weren't too traumatized by losing. Kylie's smile might have been pasted on, but I got the sense that Candy was genuinely happy, relieved, even.

That was, until her mother got to her. I couldn't hear what she said, but her body language told me she blamed Candy for ruining everything. I hoped Candy would remind her who had got into an accident while getting the doughnuts so that she didn't have nearly the support on election day that the other candidates had.

I made my way over to Wes. "We did it."

"Yeah." He didn't sound too enthusiastic. "They didn't get the tiara, but they're still going to get away with it."

"True. But the crime wave should be over."

"The damage to the community has been done, and without an arrest, people still won't feel safe."

"Well, look on the bright side: She may not have given up entirely. She may still do something you could arrest her for."

He frowned. "That's what I'm afraid of."

MY SATURDAY MORNING commute was even easier than my usual trek downstairs because the best spot for viewing the parade was my bedroom window. I brought tea and toast to my bedroom and sat in front of the window to watch the crowd forming along Main Street. It might have been fun to be among the others down on the street, but I'd have a better view from up here. I noticed that upstairs windows up and down the street were open, so I wasn't the only one thinking that way. When I stuck my head out the

window to look around, Margarita waved to me from her window over her restaurant down the block.

Half my interest in the parade was covering it as a reporter, but I also had to agree with Wes that the crisis probably wasn't over yet. Not only was the case not solved in a way that could be announced publicly, but I also feared that Ashley wouldn't give up so easily. After all she'd done to get those crystals, she wasn't going to stop with what she had—or thought she had, since the crystals she had now weren't real. She'd make another attempt to get her hands on the tiara, and with her husband's trial starting Monday, the parade and festival were her best opportunity. Latisha would be out in public, wearing the tiara, all day.

"Oh, I do love a parade," Jean said as she materialized at the other window.

"I thought you weren't going to pop in to my apartment uninvited," I said.

"This is a special circumstance. And maybe you should have invited me."

"You're right, I should have," I admitted.

"So, did you catch our thief last night?"

"We stopped her from cheating to win the crown, but we didn't really catch her, as there's nothing to arrest her for. We don't have any evidence of her being involved in the thefts."

"I suppose that's better than nothing. Pity you can't get a story out of this."

"I may not have quite the same standards of evidence as the police, but I'd be opening us up to a massive lawsuit if I tried to insinuate that Ashley Parker was responsible for the thefts, especially since we only know about that because of supernatural things."

"Maybe someone should start a rumor. Then at least the town would know who was to blame."

"I'm totally the wrong person for that. I'm not that plugged in to the community yet."

I could hear the distant sound of a drum cadence as the parade began. I turned to look out the window to see a group of horses whose riders carried flags. Behind them came the junior high marching band, followed by a truck pulling a decorated flatbed trailer with several of the duchesses sitting on it. They threw candy to the crowd.

It went on like that, with trailers of duchesses interspersed with other parade units until the high school marching band came down the street, followed by convertibles bearing the queen candidates. The last unit in the parade, aside from the police escort bringing up the rear, was Latisha, sitting on the back of a convertible. The crystals in the tiara caught the sunlight, making her look like she had a halo.

The car suddenly jerked forward, and I thought for a second that Latisha would fall off, but her balance was good and she caught herself as the car eased back to its previous pace. The driver shook his head, like he wasn't sure what had happened.

I thought I knew. Ashley stood on the sidewalk right where it had happened, frowning in intense concentration. She definitely hadn't given up.

Chapter Twenty-One

As soon as the end of the parade passed my window, I dashed downstairs to get to the festival grounds by the railroad in time for the opening ceremony. I ran through the alley, bypassing the parade crowds that were inching down Main Street. The street had been blocked off, and the festival was set up on the street and in the park around the museums. I squeezed through the growing crowd to reach the site of the opening ceremony at the end of Main Street. Latisha arrived just as I got there. The mayor gave her a hand down from the convertible and escorted her to the ribbon strung between a pair of stanchions.

While the mayor and some other local dignitaries made speeches and the marching band played, I kept an eye out for Ashley. I was sure she wasn't giving up on getting the tiara, so she had to be nearby. Then again, with her power, anyone here could be her unwitting minion, like I was fairly certain Latisha's driver in the parade had been.

The opening ceremony went off without a hitch, possibly because even someone as desperate as Ashley might realize that making a move on Latisha while she was holding a giant pair of scissors was probably not the smartest idea. Once the carnival was officially open, the crowd dispersed through the grounds.

It was a pity that I not only was here for work but also felt like I should keep my eye out for whatever Ashley's next move might be because the carnival looked like a lot of fun. There were a few

rides, including a Ferris wheel and a carousel, along with entertainment stages scattered around the grounds, lots of food booths, and a number of vendors. I wasn't sure where to go first, either for news coverage purposes or to foil Ashley, but I decided to start with a funnel cake to keep my strength up.

Tami joined me while I was standing in line at the funnel cake booth. "So, what do you think?" she asked. "Just like one of those movies, right? Not the Christmas ones, though. You'd have to throw some fake snow on the ground and have everyone drinking hot cocoa for that—and we do have a Christmas carnival kind of like that, but without the snow. There's no point in even pretending about that around here. But you're the city girl in the small town. See any local guys you like?"

I made a show of glancing around and immediately spotted Wes, who was in uniform, clearly on duty. I wasn't normally keen on cops, but growing up in a military family had probably programmed me to find men in uniform appealing. I quickly shut that thought down. In a crowd this size, he might not be able to figure out whose thoughts he was hearing, but that one would probably narrow it down to me, so I didn't want to take the chance that this was the time whatever mental shielding I had might slip. "Oh, I don't know," I said vaguely. "Right now I'm a lot more interested in the funnel cake."

"Yeah, me too. I'm bored with boys. I've got too much other stuff to do. Catch you later!" Before I could say anything else, she'd run off to find her friends and I was at the head of the line.

I was digging in to my funnel cake when Wes said from behind me, "I see you're enjoying yourself." I jumped, sending powdered sugar flying.

"I'm trying, but I'll admit I'm also worried. Did you see what happened with Latisha's car in the parade?"

"Yeah. I talked to the driver about it. He wasn't sure what happened. It was like he blacked out for a second and floored the car, but he snapped out of it quickly enough to stop it."

“Interesting,” I remarked. “Do you think it was Ashley?”

“I know it was her.”

“You read it?”

“I picked up her frustration when it didn’t work. I wouldn’t have thought a preacher’s wife would have that kind of vocabulary, even mentally.”

“What do you think she was trying for? Surely she wasn’t killing Latisha in revenge for foiling her plans by winning the crown.”

“Possibly trying to knock her off the car and knock the tiara off her head so she could get it.”

“I haven’t seen her since then. I wonder where she’ll strike next.”

He unfolded the festival guide he was carrying and looked at the schedule. “Let’s see, there’s a meet and greet session with the queen in about an hour. That would be a good spot for getting up close.”

I leaned over to read the schedule. “Wow, Jordan’s sponsoring this whole thing?”

That close to him, I could feel him bristle. “There are a few other businesses sponsoring the event. Look, Margarita has an ad in the program.” But the big sponsors were all Jordan’s companies.

“There’s a gathering of queens at noon,” I noted. “Ashley’s a former queen, so that’ll put them both on the same stage.”

“I’ll keep an eye on both events.”

“I’ll be there, too.”

He gave me the side-eye. “As a witness, maybe as a reporter, but any action would be a police matter.”

“I can help,” I protested. “I’m about the only other person who knows what’s really going on, and I have powers, too.”

“I’m not sure how helpful talking to ghosts will be now. You figured out what was going on, but leave the rest to me.”

“I do have some investigative skills that have nothing to do with being able to question dead people.”

“There’s not any investigating left to do. We know who it is. We just need to find a way to catch her and, remember, that does not include getting her to assault you.”

“I’m okay with that,” I said, shuddering as I recalled the feel of Clark Keaton’s hands around my neck. “But I don’t think that sort of thing is Ashley’s style.”

“And that’s going to be a problem. I hope she doesn’t manipulate someone else into doing something.”

“Which is why you may need help keeping an eye on things. I’ll see you at the meet and greet.”

I had about half an hour until then, so I wandered the festival, soaking up the atmosphere. In the wake of the parade, they’d filled in Main Street with more booths. The galleries lining the street were all open, with works on show. At the end of the festival area, in front of the barricade, a stage had been set up, and students from one of the local dance schools tapped away while parents took pictures and recorded video.

But there was an undercurrent to the attendees that felt wrong. A festival like this was supposed to be about the community coming together, but the rifts were visible, even to an outsider like me. People stayed clustered together in their own groups, eyeing other groups with suspicion. I noticed women clutching their purses tighter against their bodies when others passed and parents keeping their children close by their sides, especially when the children wanted to play with children from other clusters. It was painful for me to watch when I knew who the culprit was. These people didn’t have to mistrust each other.

We needed to resolve this before the festival ended, no matter what it took.

I wandered back down the street. In front of Margarita’s, Lupe sat in a pop-up pavilion draped in colorful cloth, wearing a costume that looked a lot like the fortune-teller’s outfit from the sideshow. “Have your fortune read?” she asked with a wink. “Cross my palm with silver—paper works, too. All proceeds go toward the

town food bank.”

I fished a bill out of my pocket and handed it to her as I took the seat across the table from her. She held my hand and peered at my palm. “Hmm, the thing you feared will come to pass, but it is what will get you what you want.” I was just starting to wonder if she was one of those who truly had a gift when she laughed and said, “Isn’t that what I’m supposed to say, something so vague you could apply it to anything? Unfortunately, my mother never taught me the family act.”

“I’ll let you know if it comes true,” I said.

It was almost time for the meet and greet, so I hurried back to the park. They had Latisha seated on a fan-back wicker chair under a shady canopy, greeting people who came past like a receiving line at a wedding reception. Most people shook her hand and said a few words, but a few posed for photos with her. Young girls treated her like a genuine celebrity, and I was pleased by how gracious she was with them. They could certainly do a lot worse for a personal heroine.

I didn’t see a sign of Ashley or Candy. That made me more nervous than if they’d been lurking behind Latisha’s chair. I spotted Charlene standing nearby with her husband, fanning herself with a festival program. “Your whole family must be so proud,” I said to her.

“Royce here almost couldn’t get his shirt buttoned this morning, his chest was so puffed out,” she said. “I guess all our work paid off.”

“I don’t think she needed that much help.”

Her smile faded, and she glanced around before saying softly, “You don’t think that woman will try anything else, do you?”

“We’re keeping an eye out,” I assured her. I spotted my photographer and excused myself to make sure he was getting the shots I wanted.

I just had time to grab a lemonade before the gathering of queens. There must have been nearly a century worth of queens

represented there, ranging from Latisha to a frail woman in a wheelchair being pushed by an attendant in scrubs. Her winner's sash was yellowed with age. Ashley was there, making Candy hold a mirror as she touched up her makeup. The other queens all stopped to talk to Ashley, hugging her or patting her on the back in sympathy and support. That made me even more determined to bust her. It was painfully ironic that she seemed to be the one person no one suspected of being the thief.

Tami and Jenny joined me, both of them holding bags of popcorn. "Think she'll try anything?" Tami asked with a glance at Ashley.

"I would say I hope not, but if she does, it gives the authorities a chance to do something about it." I almost said "us," but I didn't want the girls to get involved, and saying "us" would have only encouraged them.

Wes stood near the stage, looking stern and official. I couldn't see his eyes behind his sunglasses, but I got the impression he was watching Ashley.

Ashley took her mirror back from Candy and bent to put it in her purse, which was sitting on the ground. "Whoa, hang on a minute," Tami said. "She's wearing my necklace!"

I squinted, trying to see, but as Ashley straightened, she tucked whatever necklace she was wearing back under the neckline of her dress. "Are you sure?" I asked. "Wasn't it in the box of returned jewelry?"

"It wasn't in the box, and I'm pretty sure she's wearing it."

"So, she has at least one crystal. I wonder how powerful it is. And you should tell Wes. Her wearing stolen property may give him something to work with." In case he was listening, I made a point of thinking it, directing the thought to him. I thought he nodded slightly in acknowledgment, but it was hard to tell if he was actually reacting to me.

The organizers began herding all the former queens onto and around the stage for a group photo. The older ladies with

wheelchairs, walkers, and canes were on the ground in front of the stage, and Latisha was in the center at the front of the stage with all the other former queens surrounding her. Ashley was to the far right, near the front. I was surprised by how far she was from Latisha, but she seemed to have positioned herself to be seen rather than to have easy access to the tiara. I didn't know if that meant she wasn't actually going to do anything or that she had a scheme cooking.

Very soon after everyone was in place and the first picture had been taken, I decided she had a scheme cooking. The queens on the stage began moving forward, not in a stampede, but more of a subtle inching, like everyone shuffled their feet and ended up moving an inch or two forward. That happened two or three times before it began affecting Latisha, who was being shoved toward the edge of the stage. I thought I saw a moment of her smile breaking, but she adjusted her stance and held her ground.

I looked to Wes to see if he'd noticed. He was watching the stage, but there wasn't anything he could do. I stepped up behind the newspaper photographer and called out, "Can all of you back up just a step? You're crowding the front." The women moved backward, creating space around Latisha. A moment later, they were moving again, this time in a rapid surge that sent Latisha over the edge.

I thought she'd land on the woman in the wheelchair, but her athletic ability kicked in, and she managed to dive over the wheelchair, hitting the ground in a roll and bouncing instantly back to her feet. Ashley was already moving toward her. "Oh, you dropped the tiara!" she called out, then came up short when she saw that the tiara was still firmly planted on Latisha's head, nestled in among her curls.

Latisha frowned, patted her head, and smiled. "Don't worry, anything gets near my hair, you practically have to cut it out."

Some of the other queens had come down from the stage, and they kept pushing, knocking Ashley off her feet. I didn't think

Ashley was doing that, was she? She threw out her hands to catch herself, and a tiara dropped to the ground. I moved forward to pick it up. I had to elbow Ashley out of the way as she went for it at the same time. "Oh, you dropped this, Ashley," I said, raising my voice for theatrical effect. It was a perfect duplicate of the queen's tiara. "What's this? How is there another one?" Latisha patted her head again to make sure she was still wearing hers. Now I thought I knew what Ashley was up to. She'd been trying to knock the crown off Latisha's head so she could swap it out for a duplicate. That must have been her original plan, and it had to have been in the works for weeks for her to have had a copy made. I glanced at Candy, who was smiling smugly. Was she trying to expose her mother?

Ashley apparently thought so. I'd been worried she'd attack Latisha, but she whirled on her daughter instead. "You little bitch!" she cried out, slapping Candy so hard that the girl fell. She got in a good kick before both Latisha and Wes intervened. Latisha inserted herself between Candy and her mother, blocking any additional blows, and Wes grabbed Ashley to pull her away.

"Enough of that," Wes said, keeping a good grip on Ashley.

The necklace had come out from where she'd hidden it, and Tami took that opportunity to shout, "Hey, that's my necklace! It's been missing. How did she get it? Is she the one who's been stealing our stuff all along?" I thought she was perhaps a bit too dramatic, but it was a pretty good performance for someone who wasn't in the drama club.

Latisha helped Candy to her feet and stood with a protective arm around her. Candy's face was red where her mother had struck her. "I want to press charges," she said, her voice shaking. "You should also know that she's the one who was stealing all that jewelry."

"You started it!" her mother spat. "You stole the necklace and told me about the others. They were all ours to begin with. We're the victims here."

More cops had come on the scene, and they escorted Ashley and Candy away. They didn't cuff either of them, but they kept a tight enough grip that I didn't think they'd be able to escape.

I turned to the photographer. "Did you get the shot you wanted, or do you need everyone to get back in position?" I asked.

"I'd like a couple of shots without her in them, if you don't mind," Latisha said. I could hardly blame her.

THE CARNIVAL BECAME a lot more fun after Ashley was taken away. I could relax and actually enjoy it. The atmosphere had already changed as word of the thieves' identity rippled through the festival grounds. The suspicious clusters of people spread out and mingled as everyone smiled at each other and stopped to gossip about the news. This was more like what I expected of a small-town festival. I watched the Corelli family's impressive acrobatics show before going to Margarita's taco stand for a late lunch. "That was quite a bit of excitement," she said as she put together my tacos.

"Yeah, it was crazy," I said. "Are all your festivals so eventful?"

"Not nearly."

"Your grandmother gave me a rather accurate fortune," I said, realizing just how accurate it had been. I'd been afraid that Ashley would strike, but her doing so gave Wes a reason to arrest her.

"Did she?" she said mildly. "Even a stopped clock is right twice a day. But aside from the craziness at the gathering of queens, are you having a good time? I hate that you're all by yourself. It's no fun to be alone at a carnival. Maybe I can escape from the booth later in the afternoon, but the restaurant's also open, so my staff is spread out."

"It's okay. That makes it easier to observe, and people are being friendly enough." True, it might have been more fun if I'd been part of a group or even had one friend to hang out with, but I

wasn't getting the lonely in a crowd feeling here.

I was eating my tacos while watching a rather good concert by the high school's stage band when Wes joined me, now in civilian clothes.

"Is everything wrapped up?" I asked.

"For now." He gave me a meaningful look, and I moved with him to where we could talk without being overheard. "They threw each other under the bus. It seems Candy found an old journal in her grandmother's house that told about the crystal being taken out of the hypnotist's turban, broken up, and distributed among the rest of the troupe. Someone had kept track of who got the pieces and what jewelry they put them in, then followed the lines over the years. Ashley's great-grandmother seems to have had an extramarital affair with the Amazing Crenshaw that resulted in a pregnancy, and she was the one keeping records."

"Wow, that document could be valuable—or dangerous."

"Yeah, in the wrong hands it could be a problem. The grandmother kept it updated but wasn't doing anything with it. Candy took the first thing on a whim—Tami's necklace. She could tell a slight difference in her effect on people and told her mother, just as a point of interest. Ashley took it from there. She saw it as a chance to set everything right. She could make her husband come back to her for good, make the jury clear him, and generally get her old life back." He shook his head. "I'm not sure how to file the charges. I don't think I could get anything out of going after her for the thefts, and she'd just sound crazy."

"Did you find Mrs. Morton's missing jewelry? I thought those pieces might elevate it to a felony."

"We're still searching their house. If they find anything, that, along with Tami's necklace, at least gives us possession of stolen property. It won't get her sent away for good, but between that and the assault on her daughter, it will keep her out of the courtroom for her husband's trial. I'm also referring her for a psychological evaluation."

“They’ll think she’s crazy.”

“I’m sure she’s smart enough not to spill the real truth to anyone who isn’t local. But I think with all she’s gone through, she needs some counseling.”

“What about Candy?”

He sighed. “That’s trickier. She confessed to taking the necklace and participating in some of the thefts. Even if we can get her indicted, I’m sure a halfway decent defense lawyer could get her off. Given that her mother attacked her in public, she could claim that her abusive mother coerced her into participating. Again, that may be up to the DA.”

“What do you even tell the DA?”

“That they learned the crystals used to belong to their family and were taking them back. We don’t have to mention the hypnosis part.”

“It’s not the most satisfying conclusion,” I said.

“It seldom is when the weird stuff is involved. We can’t deal with it on the record. But the thefts should stop. And there were enough public accusations that it seems like the town feels the case is resolved, which is the important part.”

“I’ve already noticed the change in atmosphere. What do I even write about this?”

“You’re asking me?”

“You’re the one always so worried about what I’m going to print. Are you telling me all this now as an official briefing, or are you telling me as a conspirator?”

“We have to make sure the news gets out to ease the paranoia. Maybe go with what she said about the stones belonging to their family.”

“Okay, I can do that. What about the crystals? Should we return them, too?”

He turned his head in both directions, stretching his neck like he had tension to work out. “I don’t know,” he said wearily. “I doubt we could get them all back to their original owners, and we

don't exactly have them honestly."

"The original troupe had the right idea, chopping the crystal up into small bits so no one could get too much power."

"We don't need a power boost these days, though. We aren't making our living that way."

"Throw them in the river so they aren't a threat anymore? That would scatter them."

"I hate to do something so random. There's no telling where they might end up."

"What we need to do is redistribute those crystals in a way that they'd be difficult to track down again."

He gave a sudden grin that lit up his face. "I know. I have a cousin who makes jewelry. If I mix these with some normal crystals and give them to her, she can work them into pieces she sells. No one will know who gets the good crystals, and they may not make it to people who have powers to amplify. But they might still be in town if we ever need them again."

"You think we'll face a magical war?"

"I like to be prepared for anything. But for now, there's a carnival. Are you up for the Ferris wheel? I hate riding with a stranger, so I need someone in the other seat."

"Sounds like fun." And it really did. It was the kind of thing characters did in those romantic movies, though I didn't expect anything truly romantic to happen.

As we waited in line for the Ferris wheel, he said, "Thanks for your help in all this. It's hard to handle this sort of thing officially."

"I thought you didn't want me getting involved."

"I didn't want you putting yourself in danger. That's different."

"Well, now that I know what you know, I'll tell you the next time a ghost gives me a hot tip."

He gave me the kind of look that felt like he was seeing right through me, and in his case, that was a distinct possibility. I tried to keep my mind blank instead of thinking about that as he said, "I'll hold you to that."

We reached the front of the line, took our seat on the wheel, got secured, and rose into the sky together.

LEXIE'S ADVENTURES will continue soon.

To find out when book 3 is available and receive an exclusive short story about the history of Stirling Mills, [sign up for the Shanna Swendson mailing list](#).

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SHANNA SWENDSON earned a journalism degree from the University of Texas and used to work in public relations but decided it was more fun to make up the people she wrote about, so now she's a full-time novelist. She lives in Irving, Texas, with several hardy houseplants and too many books to fit on the shelves.

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